

Afghan Peace Process: Prospects and Challenges for Pakistan

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Abstract

Pakistan has taken the much needed initiative to bring about peace and stability in the conflict ridden Afghanistan. The 2+2+1 peace talks have been made possible with the dedicated efforts and commitment by Pakistan that managed to bring Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table with the Afghan government, along with ensuring China's and US' role as the observer in the peace talks. This very fact is reflective of the significance of this issue not just for Afghanistan but for the whole region and beyond. Because of the several inherent fault lines one cannot be sure of the success or sustainability of the process since it is embroiled in a number of challenges. However, Pakistan believes that with concerted efforts and dedication, this can be made possible. Since this objective, if materialized, holds great dividends for Pakistan, it is wholeheartedly committed to its success and to meet the challenges head on.

Key words: Afghan Peace Process, Murree Talks, Pakistan's Mediatory Role, Afghan Owned and Afghan Led Peace Process, Regional Peace and Stability.

Introduction

The Murree talks¹ initiative for the sole purpose of bringing peace in Afghanistan has been a crucial moment in deciding the future pattern of security not only in the region, but closely hinges to it is the security at

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¹Zahid Hussain, "Analysis: Cautious Optimism after Murree Talks", *Dawn*, July 9, 2015, accessed October 1, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1193272>.

the global front too. This is the very reason that the representatives of the United States (US) and China are also part of these talks, while Pakistan being a moderator/facilitator has a golden opportunity not only to come across as a responsible state, fully committed to the implementation of peace inside Afghanistan, but also between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The negotiations between Afghan government and Afghan Taliban made a breakthrough, which became possible with the help of Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan could cash in on this opportunity and try to win back the trust of Afghanistan, secure its North Western borders, revisit its political, economic and social equation with Afghanistan, and try to mitigate or balance out India's stronghold in Afghanistan. In order to achieve these objectives, Pakistan is still striving hard to make sure that it remains an Afghan led and Afghan owned peace process² with least dictation or involvement by another party, and should be culminated with the mutual satisfaction of Afghan and Taliban leadership, notwithstanding the suspension of talks between the parties. However, it is not going to be a walk in the park for Afghan leaders, Taliban or Pakistan, as there are several impediments which have the potential to stall the process and each party needs to be watchful of such elements. This paper is an attempt at scrutinizing the main aims and objectives of these talks, the probable prospects of peace it promises and the dividends that Pakistan is going to reap if the talks are culminated successfully. The fact that the peace talks have direct implications for Pakistan provides a sufficient rationale to carry out a detailed study on this subject. It is an ongoing issue with several possibilities that might emerge at any time with positive or negative repercussions for Pakistan. The paper substantially attempts to

²Tahir Khan, "China Commends Pakistan Brokered Afghan Peace Process", *The Express Tribune*, August 15, 2015, accessed September 22, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/938639/china-commends-pakistan-brokered-afghan-peace-process/>

decipher those probabilities while the analysis of various dimensions of this whole episode will be of great help to the policy makers in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Developments So Far

The “Afghan Peace Process” or “Murree talks”³ were initiated on July 7, 2015 after a 14 year long deadlock between Afghan Taliban and Afghan Government.⁴ The main leadership that attended the talks was the Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai who represented Afghan government and Mullah Abbas Durrani who led the Afghan Taliban along with other representative belonging to Taliban's Qatar office and main political Shura, while Pakistan served as a mediator represented by Aizaz Chaudhry, the Foreign Secretary of Pakistan.⁵ It was the extensive diplomatic effort by Pakistan that made the talks possible and for which Pakistan has been lauded by the US as well. Since Pakistan aspires to project itself as a peace loving country,⁶ it believes that peace in Afghanistan is closely linked to peace in Pakistan and ultimately to the regional and global peace. At the same time Pakistan's Foreign Office is committed to strictly keeping it an Afghan led and Afghan owned peace process without any involvement, interference, or unnecessary influence by any third party.⁷

³“Second Round of Afghan Peace Talks in Murree on Friday: report”, *Pakistan Today*, July 29, 2015, accessed August 3, 2015, <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2015/07/29/national/second-round-of-afghan-peace-talks-in-murree-on-friday-report/>

⁴Suraya Raiszada, “Pakistan Says Afghan govt., Taliban Peace Talks Successful”, *The Kabul Times*, August 13, 2015, accessed August 20, 2015, <http://thekabultimes.gov.af/index.php/opinions/politics/7367-pakistan-says-afghan-govt-taliban-peace-talks-successful.html>

⁵Baqir Sajjad Syed, “Afghan govt., Taliban Agree to Build Trust”, *DAWN*, July 9, 2015, accessed August 4, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1193306>

⁶“US Lauds Pakistan for Facilitating Murree Talks”, *Express Tribune*, July 23, 2015, accessed July 25, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/925130/us-lauds-pakistan-for-facilitating-murree-talks/>

⁷Mateen Haider, “First Round Of Afghan Govt, Taliban Dialogue Concludes in Murree”, *Dawn*, July 8, 2015, accessed July 13, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1192941>

The first round of peace talks were held in Murree, Pakistan during the Islamic month of Ramazan⁸ in a very positive environment. The reports claim that the overall atmosphere remained genial⁹ and both sides openly discussed their outstanding issues making sure they firmly put their point across. The meeting lasted until the wee hours of Sehri.¹⁰ Taliban demanded a definite time frame for the complete withdrawal of foreign troops, release of Taliban who were held as prisoners, Afghan Constitution to be amended, the removal of Taliban leader's names from the US sanctions list, and to install an interim government till the new representative government is legally elected.¹¹ Except for one demand about the interim government, all the other demands made by Taliban were cordially accepted to be considered by Afghan government officials.¹² Another aspect of these talks is the presence of two major powers China and the US as observer states¹³ highlighting the significance of this process not just for the regional states but also for the global actors as well. However, another important fact to keep in mind is

⁸Mateen Haider, "First Round of Afghan govt., Taliban Dialogue Concludes in Murree", *Dawn*, July 8, 2015, accessed July 13, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1192941>

⁹Syeda Mamoona Rubab, "An 'Ice-Breaker' in Murree", *The Friday Times*, July 10, 2015, accessed July 20, 2015, <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/an-ice-breaker-in-murree/>

¹⁰"Kabul Plans Detailed Taliban Talks on Ending Bloodshed", *Dawn*, July 9, 2015, accessed August 4, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1193392>

¹¹Tahir Khan, "Mullah Omar's Approval Could Formalize Afghan Reconciliation", *The Express Tribune*, July 17, 2015, accessed September 14, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/922758/mullah-omars-approval-could-formalise-afghan-reconciliation/>

¹²Tahir Khan, "Kabul Amenable to All But One Taliban Demand", *The Express Tribune*, March 2, 2016, accessed May 12, 2016, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1057491/kabul-amenable-to-all-but-one-taliban-demands/>

¹³Joseph Goldstein and Mujib Mashal, "Afghan Officials and Taliban Meet in Possible Step Towards Peace Talks", *The New York Times*, July 7, 2015, accessed August 10, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/08/world/asia/taliban-leaders-are-said-to-meet-with-afghan-officials.html?_r=0

that some factions inside Afghanistan are still against these talks. At the same time, the cross border terrorist activities¹⁴ did continue to pose threats and hindrances in the way of smooth progress on the peace process.¹⁵

Shortly after the negotiations had taken place, the Afghan Taliban disavowed the peace process especially owing to the news of the death of their leader Mullah Omar was made public.¹⁶ Nonetheless Pakistan did not give up on the prospects of having peace in Afghanistan and is actively pursuing to bring the parties back on the negotiating table. Though it is proving quite daunting with each passing day where the killing of Mullah Mansoor and the deteriorating trend in Pak-Afghan relations are serving to be the major impediments. Initially it was decided that the next round of talks would be scheduled in four to six weeks into winters,¹⁷ but no concrete progress on that could be achieved. The situation has considerably changed after the killing of Mullah Akhtar Mansoor in a US drone strike in Pakistan's Baluchistan province on 21st May 2016.¹⁸ There have been mixed views about the fledgling fate of peace process after his demise. On one hand, considering the fact that he has been against the peace talks,

¹⁴“Badaber Attack”, *Dawn*, September 19, 2015, accessed October 1, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1207887>

¹⁵John Lee Anderson, “The Fall of Kunduz”, *The New Yorker*, October 6, 2015, accessed October 8, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-fall-of-kunduz>

¹⁶Kay Johnson, “Taliban Disavows Afghan Peace Talks After Leader Declared Dead”, *Reuters*, July 30, 2015, accessed August 3, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/30/us-afghanistan-taliban-fighting-idUSKCN0Q40DW20150730>

¹⁷“Winter could Revive Afghan Peace Talks” *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, October 14, 2015, accessed October 14, 2015, <http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/assets/epaper/October%2014,%202015/Front%20Page.pdf>

¹⁸Shereena Qazi, “Afghan's Taliban Mullah Mansoor 'Killed in US Strike’”, *AlJazeera*, May 23, 2016, accessed May 26, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/taliban-leader-killed-drone-strike-160521204020111.html>

it was largely being speculated that his demise would have a positive impact on the peace process but the talks have so far foundered.¹⁹ On the other hand, Pakistan has voiced its concern over the killing of Mullah Mansoor which according to its National Security Advisor, Mr. Sartaj Aziz, instead of helping has only scuttled the progress.²⁰ However, Pakistan is still hopeful about the revival of peace process. Mr. Sartaj Aziz stated that even though the insurgency has increased in Afghanistan after the initiation of first round of peace talks, the ultimate solution still resides in the resumption of talks.²¹

Prospects for Pakistan

Even though the peace talks between Afghan government and Taliban started off on a positive note, yet the process has suddenly come to a standstill. These talks could bring major benefits to Pakistan, provided the Pakistani leadership could optimally make use of the situation. The geographical contiguity, ideological similarities, cultural affinity with Afghanistan and now the diplomatic position which Pakistan has been able to establish for itself as a facilitator in the peace talks, naturally provides Pakistan with an ideal opportunity to reinforce its standing in the regional politics. Some of the probable benefits Pakistan can achieve are as follows:

a) Peaceful Neighbor:

Since its inception, Pakistan has been dealing with a hostile neighbor India in the East. While Pakistan's relations vis-à-vis other South Asian states have generally been cordial, India has taken up the major share of Pakistan's policy orientation. The biggest chunk of financial budget

¹⁹Ahmad Shah Karimi, "Afghan Peace Process After Mullah Mansoor!", *The Daily Afghanistan*, May 24, 2016, accessed May 29, 2016, http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/topics.php?post_id=15335

²⁰Kamran Yousaf, "Afghanistan, Pakistan Discuss Fate of Peace Process After Mansour's Death", *Express Tribune*, May 30, 2016, accessed June 3, 2016, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1112851/afghanistan-pakistan-discuss-fate-peace-process-mansours-death/>

²¹Mateen Haider, "Efforts Underway to Revive Stalled Afghan Peace Talks", *Dawn*, September 15, 2015, accessed September 23, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1207149>

goes into defence sector²² in order to fortify the country's defence against much bigger and militarily strong eastern neighbor. In this backdrop, Pakistan cannot afford to alienate another neighbor on its western border. Allowing antagonistic elements to prosper in Afghanistan, while already being engaged with India, would be suicidal for Pakistan. Hence, Pakistan's first and foremost concern is to have a peaceful neighbor at its western border without any internal weaknesses that could directly have negative repercussions for Pakistan. It is believed that peace in Afghanistan guarantees peace in Pakistan. If an understanding is reached between Afghan Taliban and Afghan government, this will curtail the growth of terrorism not only within Afghanistan but will also keep it away from spreading on towards Pakistan. This can ensure better security for Pakistan's north western border along Afghanistan. Therefore a peaceful Afghanistan is in the best interest of Pakistan.

b) Creating Pakistan's Positive Image:

Pakistan is keen on improving and enhancing its positive image in the region as well as worldwide. It wants to appear as a responsible state fully committed for peace development in the region. Pakistan's intensive efforts as a mediator for these talks have already garnered quite a lot of appreciation at the international front.²³ The whole development shows Pakistan in a positive light where its international standing has increased manifold and chances of it being taken seriously on the important issues has also been further augmented. Along with bringing dignity to Pakistan, it has also highlighted the fact that peace in Afghanistan is not possible without Pakistan's involvement. Pakistan has been able to exert its position as a central player which could rein in violence and endorse peace. So these peace talks have brought an immense opportunity for Pakistan to improve its international reputation as a 'Peace promoter'.

²²Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Defence Budget Raised by 11.6pc to Rs. 781 billion", *Dawn*, June 6, 2015, accessed September 3, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1186510>

²³"Peace, Development in Afghanistan: UN Appreciates Pakistan's Contributions", *Business Recorder*, November 5, 2015, accessed on January 18, 2016, <http://www.brecorder.com/general-news/172/1246713/?tmpl=component&print=1&layout=default&page=>

c) Rebuilding Mutual Trust:

The Murree meeting clearly demonstrated Pakistan's genuine intentions to bring stability in Afghanistan. This should be duly acknowledged by the Afghan leadership too. Both the sides need to reevaluate each other's motives and let the trust build between them. Pakistan can convince Afghanistan to have open channels of cooperation and information sharing with each other. The trust building will not only help the two sides to adopt result oriented approach towards building peace in the region but will also be instrumental in making the two sides look out for each other's interests. This could be achieved by having more confidence building measures and making sure they are positively implemented and followed through.

d) Mitigate India's Influence:

It is crucial for Pakistan to counter and neutralize India's influence in Afghanistan. Owing to the historical closeness that former Afghan President Hamid Karzai enjoyed with India,²⁴ the Indian fast growing influence in Afghanistan was expected. India has been providing developmental and economic aid²⁵ to Afghanistan with an aim to exert its military influence²⁶ and to seek a much bigger political role in Afghanistan. That Indian trained Afghan militants causing unrest in Pakistan is also a matter of grave concern for Pakistan.²⁷ All of these factors pose a direct challenge to Pakistan's security as well as to its

²⁴Suhasini Haidar, "Controversial Afghan-Pak Intelligence MoU 'Does Not Remain', Says Hamid Karzai", *The Hindu*, September 4, 2015, accessed September 15, 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/interview-with-former-afghanistan-president-hamid-karzai/article7612242.ece>

²⁵Rajeev Agarwal, "Post 2014 Afghanistan: Policy Options for India and Iran", *IPCS Issue Brief* 247 (2014): 5 accessed October 3, 2015, IB247-ColAgarwal-Afg.pdf

²⁶Sandeep Dikshit, "India Helping in Having Our Own Army", *The Hindu*, December 14, 2013, accessed September 4, 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-helping-in-having-our-own-army-karzai/article5458705.ece>

²⁷Zahid Gishkori, "RAW Behind Terrorist Activities in Pakistan: Foreign Secretary", *The Express Tribune*, May 14, 2015, accessed September 12, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/886198/raw-behind-terrorist-activities-in-pakistan-foreign-secretary/>

interests in Afghanistan. By promoting and facilitating the peace process, Pakistan is hoping to diminish and undermine India's relevance for Afghanistan. The aim is to reclaim the lost trust through working for the interests of both Afghanistan and Pakistan, while ultimately being able to convince Afghanistan to sideline India.

Pakistan also seeks to engage Afghanistan in an interdependent relationship based on mutually beneficial economic linkages.

e)Eradicating Terrorism/ Enabling Economic Prosperity/ Strengthening of Defence and National Security:

Although the possibility of economic prosperity, eradication of terrorism and fortification of national security not solely hinge upon peace in Afghanistan, nonetheless instability in Afghanistan surely makes the biggest part of turbulence for Pakistan in these areas. Despite the fact that Pakistan has actively been involved in fighting against terrorism as a front line ally of the US, it remains to be the most infected with the menace of various forms of terrorism. Unfortunately 'Terrorism' is not a new phenomenon for Pakistan, who has been grappling with this challenge long before the 9/11 attacks took place and made the concept of terrorism known worldwide. For Pakistan, however, it was the Afghan war in late 1970s and Pakistan's active role in it that brought a number of challenges among which the religious extremism, mushrooming of Madrassahs, the zest for Jihad, introduction of Kalashnikov, influx of Afghan refugees and the drug culture are some of the major factors that have pulled Pakistan into a quagmire of social, political and economic, as well as security problems. The proliferation of these tendencies from Afghanistan across the border into Pakistan was further easily facilitated because of the porous nature of Pak-Afghan border. When after the collapse of Soviet Union, the Afghan Mujahideen were left without a patronage of the US, which had deserted them, the disgruntled and displaced Afghans in the aftermath of the war, not only found refuge on the Pakistani side along the border where the locals were naturally sympathetic towards them for their cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious similarities, but they also became an easy target to be exploited

by the anti-Pakistan forces to carry out the act of violence and sabotage, and fueling other already existing sectarian and ethnic crisis in Pakistan.

Later on in 2001, in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, once again Pakistan found itself in a pretty much same situation, i.e., hired to serve the US' interests in the region, at the cost of sustaining uncountable casualties and once again left alone to deal with even more intensive wave of terrorism, coupled with the economic challenge of accommodating the displaced Afghan refugees. Pakistan's participation in the US' led fights on Afghan soil, has served to damage its equation with Afghanistan and has flared up hostilities and distrust to a great deal.

However, once Pakistan's efforts in the ongoing Afghan peace process are recognized by the Afghan government and Afghan Taliban, the peace process will be able to proceed more positively and Pakistan will find prospects for peace on its own soil too. First and foremost, Pakistan will be able to send the refugees back to Afghanistan, resulting in a huge economic relief. Not just that but this financial respite may allow Pakistan to invest in its social sector which is in deplorable condition. Similarly with the help of Afghan government, mutually acceptable and prudent framework could be devised to collectively counter the threat of terrorism more effectively. By minimizing the internal and external vulnerabilities, Pakistan will be in a better position to ensure its national security.

Impediments

Despite all the above mentioned probable benefits, the Afghan peace process is highly prone to glitches and impediments. Some have already negatively affected further improvement on the talks, as the next round of negotiations after being postponed a couple of times, has still not been materialized. Following are some of the factors which could stall the progress on the talks.

a) The Killings of Taliban Leadership

The role of leadership in any kind of negotiations among the belligerents cannot be ruled out anywhere, therefore, the continued counter-terrorism actions against the Taliban's main leadership is the first and foremost impediment for development of Afghanistan peace process. Even though Mullah Mansoor's tenure of leadership could not prove to be of much help with regards to any positive developments on the peace talks, his death has apparently given an even harder blow to the already fledging peace process. The hopes of resuming peace talks were stashed once the new Taliban leader Mullah Haibatullah replaced Mullah Mansoor after latter's death in a counter-terrorism action by the US drone attack. One reason why peace might prove to be daunting is the way Mullah Mansoor was killed. This would only fortify the Afghan Taliban's resolve that the US and all the other stakeholders in the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) of Afghanistan, are out to hunt Afghan Taliban down. The deeply ingrained skepticism within Afghan Taliban about the possibility of their inclusion in the peace process and the distrust that they have against the sincerity of QCG's intentions to bring peace in Afghanistan could further be deepened. This may provoke them to continue their fight and struggle against the pro-peace actors. This could very well be the reason that Haibatullah Akhonzada was immediately appointed as the new leader by Taliban Rahbari Shura²⁸, with the main aim to avoid leadership battle and to continue the hardliner policies of their predecessors Mullah Mansoor and Mullah Umer. This is also to be kept in mind that Mullah Mansoor was able to consolidate power for himself among the Afghan Taliban by staunchly refusing to be part of the peace process²⁹. Such an approach is still seen as crucial in winning the trust and support of Taliban. Hence Haibatullah Akhonzada is more likely to adopt the same hard-line stance as his

²⁸Sune Engle Rasmussen and Jon Boone, "Afghan Taliban Appoint Mullah Haibatullah Akhonzada as New Leader", *The Guardian*, May 25, 2016, accessed May 29, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/25/taliban-new-leader-death-confirm-mullah-mansoor-haibatullah-akhonzada>

²⁹Abdul Ahad Bahrami, "The Aftermath of Mullah Mansoor's Killing", *The Daily Afghanistan*, May 25, 2016, accessed May 29, 2016, http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/topics.php?post_id=15347

predecessors. The element of avenging Mullah Mansoor's killing could override new leadership's agenda,³⁰ consequently putting a deadlock to the peace process. The Taliban are already blaming Afghan government and Pakistan for the death of their leader and will probably not show any ready willingness to join any peace talks backed by Pakistan.³¹

The news of Mullah Omar's death also brought direct ramifications for the peace process as one can see that it put a sudden stop to the peace talks. Just as his alleged approval³² of the peace talks back in July gave momentum and paved way for the peace process, his death brought adverse impact especially on the prospects for the process, Afghan Taliban and consequently on Pakistan, as well as on the region. The biggest and most obvious repercussion was the rift within the Afghan Taliban, who, in the aftermath of Mullah Omar's demise, found themselves unable to agree upon a mutually consensual leadership and felt to have been left without an overarching cause that could keep them united. It was only after much dissent and continued rift among the various ranks of Taliban that Mullah Mansoor was appointed as the new Taliban leader, who grappled mostly to keep the Taliban united.³³

One of the credits which could be given to Mullah Omar is that he was successful in keeping the internal fissures among the Taliban at bay. After his death, the Afghan Taliban became more vulnerable to

³⁰Tahir Ali, "Haibatullah's Challenges", *The Friday Times*, June 3, 2016, accessed June 18, 2016, <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/haibatullahs-challenges/>

³¹Abdul Ahad Bahrami, "The Aftermath of Mullah Mansoor's Killing", *The Daily Afghanistan*, May 25, 2016, accessed May 29, 2016, http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/topics.php?post_id=15347

³²"Taliban Leader Mullah Omar Hails Peace Talks to End Afghanistan War", *The Guardian*, July 15, 2015, accessed September 20, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/15/taliban-leader-mullah-omar-hails-peace-talks-to-end-afghanistan-war>

³³"New Taliban Leader Calls for Unity in Ranks in First Audio Message", *Dawn*, August 1, 2015, accessed March 4, 2016, [http://www.dawn.com/news/1197807/new-taliban-leader-calls-for-unity-in-ranks-in-first-audio-message?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+dawn-news+\(Dawn+News\)](http://www.dawn.com/news/1197807/new-taliban-leader-calls-for-unity-in-ranks-in-first-audio-message?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+dawn-news+(Dawn+News))

internal divisions, as one could witness the differing opinions among Taliban which surfaced with regards to the selection of new leader. Despite the fact that Mullah Mansoor being the new leader was able to earn appreciation and trust of the wider percentage of Taliban, he still faced opposition from within the Taliban ranks. His brutal oppression of rival groups further alienated some Taliban members who in some cases found to have joined the Islamic State (IS).³⁴ These internally divided Taliban did not seem too keen on resuming peace talks until and unless their more pressing issue of having a mutually accepted leadership for them is first addressed and amicably resolved among them. Even if that is achieved, there was no guarantee that the new leadership would be as eager to continue with the talks as their predecessor, as became evident later on by Mullah Mansoor's strong opposition to the peace talks.³⁵

Another factor that cannot be ignored is the fact that these Taliban have long been fighting a war which they consider sacred and that carries a supreme status for them. The anti-Afghan government agenda is part of the noble cause for them where "Jihad" becomes a justified option. They may still want to carry on with Jihad against the government as was evident from the takeover of Kunduz by the Taliban.³⁶ Even though initially Mullah Mansoor was widely being understood as pragmatic and someone who believed in the importance of talks over fights, the world saw even more aggressive face of Taliban under his leadership where in October 2015 they overran northern city of Kunduz and in November next month, southern province of Helmand, capturing the city

³⁴Michael E. Miller, "The New Taliban Leader Whose Shadow Hangs Over Afghan Peace Talks", *The Washington Post*, January 10, 2016, accessed on March 14, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/the-new-taliban-leader-whose-shadow-hangs-over-afghan-peace-talks/2016/01/10/b1da123e-b56d-11e5-8abc-d09392edc612_story.html

³⁵"Taliban Leader Mansoor: Man of War Not Peace Talks", *Dawn*, May 22, 2016, accessed May 26, 2016, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1107902/taliban-leader-mansoor-man-war-not-peace-talks/>

³⁶"Taliban Takeover in Kunduz Echoes Islamic State Rout of Mosul", *Express Tribune*, September 30, 2015, accessed October 3, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/964918/taliban-takeover-in-kunduz-echoes-islamic-state-rout-of-mosul/>

of Sangin, only to be later regained by the Afghan forces.³⁷ The fact remains that there is a large number of disgruntled members within Taliban, who, in the absence of any leader of Mullah Omar's stature, might feel compelled to offer allegiance to the IS militants in Afghanistan owing to IS' global Jihadi agenda, as it may allow the Afghan Taliban to pursue Jihad against the Afghan government. Hence all the efforts that have so far been made to bring Taliban and Afghan leadership together could prove nil. Instead, the Afghan government and security forces might have to deal with a greater menace: a united Afghan Taliban and IS front.

b) Skepticism and Distrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan:

Even though both Pakistan and Afghanistan have been claiming to share good friendly relations, the fact that these relations have largely been marred by a long history of distrust and suspicions dating back to 1947,³⁸ makes it a very complicated puzzle. These feelings of distrust are also attributed to the porous nature of border between them which provides easy and unchecked movement of various non-state actors to and from the either side. The role of Pakistan during Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was although aimed at helping the Afghan struggle against the foreign occupation; it is also viewed as instrumental in promoting the Jihadi culture in the region especially in Afghanistan. Even today Afghanistan remains skeptical of Pakistan's motives and finds it hard to break away from this mindset, as can be inferred from President Ashraf Ghani's statement in a conference in Doha where he openly declared that Pakistan has been waging an undeclared war in Afghanistan for

³⁷Michael E. Miller, "The New Taliban Leader Whose Shadow Hangs Over Afghan Peace Talks", *The Washington Post*, January 10, 2016, accessed on March 14, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/the-new-taliban-leader-whose-shadow-hangs-over-afghan-peace-talks/2016/01/10/b1da123e-b56d-11e5-8abc-d09392edc612_story.html

³⁸Tehseena Usman, "Trust Deficit in Pak-Afghan Relations and Its Implications: A Historical Perspective (1947-2001)", *The Dialogue*, Vol. VIII (3), September 2013, p.305. accessed September 18, 2015, http://www.qurtuba.edu.pk/thedialogue/The%20Dialogue/8_3/Dialogue_July_September2013_303-326.pdf

the past 14 years.³⁹ The misgivings are present on both sides. Pakistan has strong reasons to believe that Afghan leadership is highly under Indian influence and therefore increasingly becoming hostile towards Pakistan. While Afghanistan blames Pakistan for disrupting democratic process and causing civil unrest in the country and extending support to Afghan Taliban against the Afghan government. Pakistan is also seen as supporting Afghan Taliban to keep a check on growing Indian influence in Afghanistan as well as to use them as a counter against IS lest it spills over across the porous border into Pakistan. Hence Pakistan's commitment to curb the “sanctuaries” is highly suspected by the Afghan officials,⁴⁰ while Pakistan constantly feels insecure by the diplomatic and political leverage given to India by Afghan government. This skepticism and distrust is further aggravated by the former Afghan President Hamid Karzai's regular anti-Pakistan statements⁴¹ which are increasingly becoming popular among Afghan nationals. This state of distrust can greatly affect and disrupt the progress on peace talks if not dealt with properly.

c) The India Factor:

It is no hidden secret that India has always been trying to inflict damages to Pakistan. The intended political and diplomatic isolation of Pakistan has been the prime objective of India since forever. Same thought process is driving India's policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Other than strengthening relations with Afghanistan for the purpose of expanding its own region-wide economic and diplomatic influence, India also seeks to acquire permanent presence there so that it could work against Pakistan's interest inside Afghanistan.

³⁹Parveen Swami, “Ashraf Ghani Slams Pakistan for Waging 'Undeclared War’”, *The Indian Express*, June 2, 2015, accessed October 3, 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/asia/ashraf-ghani-slams-pakistan-for-waging-undeclared-war/>

⁴⁰“Pakistan Failed Afghan Peace Initiative: Ghani”, *The Nation*, July 10, 2016, accessed on July 12, 2016, <http://nation.com.pk/national/10-Jul-2016/pakistan-failed-afghan-peace-initiatives-ghani>

⁴¹S. Rahman, “Karzai-India Nexus Against Pakistan”, *The News*, June 21, 2015, accessed September 9, 2015, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-2-324854-Karzai-India-nexus-against-Pakistan>

India is also helping Afghanistan with developing its military force.⁴² Pakistan has a genuine fear that India's presence in Afghanistan has the potential to encircle Pakistan from two sides which means that it will have to deal with India on two fronts. Indian RAW is also active in providing training and logistics to anti-Pakistan terrorist elements in Afghanistan and sending them across the border into Pakistan.⁴³ The aim is not only to export terrorism but also to keep Pakistani security forces engaged at the border hence weakening the defence capacity by forcing it to disperse along the internal and external security issues. India also has vile designs against the ongoing peace process. A Pakistan, embroiled in its own internal security problems, will not be in a position to extend diplomatic support to any other country nor will it be seen by the others as a preferred choice as a promoter for regional peace. Hence the Indian presence in Afghanistan and Afghan government's callousness towards Pakistan's concerns, is a major stumbling block and highly detrimental to the peace process.

d) The Emerging Estrangement between Pakistan and Afghanistan:

The acrimonious element in Pak-Afghan relations is nothing new. The trust deficit between the two has a long history. While the porous nature of border is a constant source of trouble, the Indian factor makes the equation even more volatile. Nonetheless Pakistan recently had been able to garner worldwide approval for facilitating and playing an instrumental role in Afghan peace process. Yet once again the relations seem to have suffered a severe setback.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani during his interview with BBC issued a statement that relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan are not brotherly but like two states.⁴⁴ This rhetoric appeared at a

⁴²Sandeep Dikshit, "India Helping in Having Our Own Army: Karzai", *The Hindu*, December 14, 2013, accessed September 4, 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-helping-in-having-our-own-army-karzai/article5458705.ece>

⁴³Ahmad Rashid Malik, "Exposing Raw", *The Nation*, June 3, 2015, accessed October 9, 2015, <http://nation.com.pk/columns/03-Jun-2015/exposing-raw>

⁴⁴Arshad Saheen, "Ghani Says Pak-Afghan Ties Not Brotherly", *The Express Tribune*, September 29, 2015, accessed October 1, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/964171/ghani-says-pak-afghan-ties-not-brotherly/>

time when the relations between the two neighbors were already highly tense. Both sides actively got involved in condemning and accusing each other for supporting and sponsoring recent terrorist attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In such an environment where regional security is already in a state of doldrums, such proclamations are not void of severe regional implications.

First and foremost an expected shift in the mindset has not been realized. President Ghani is generally seen by Pakistan as less vindictive than his predecessor Hamid Karzai. He comes across as a person who seemed willing to recognize that terrorism is not just endemic to Pakistan. He appeared ready to take measures against the non-state actors operating from his country. However, the statement on BBC left no place for any doubt that Pakistan needs a reality check on its perception of Afghan leadership. This new stance means that the distrust has crept back in between the two or may be was never completely gone. Chief Executive Abdullah Abudllah implicated Pakistan at United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) with regards to takeover of Kunduz by Taliban further strengthens this argument.⁴⁵ On July 10, 2016 President Ashraf Ghani once again resorted to using allegations against Pakistan at the NATO summit,⁴⁶ claiming that the present stalemate in the peace process is largely because of the soft corner Pakistan has for Taliban since it keeps discriminating between good and bad Taliban, instead of viewing them all as detrimental to the peace process, Afghanistan, and the region. Such statements irrespective of their credibility are sure to adversely affect any efforts towards improvement of bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

⁴⁵“Islamabad Says Taliban Takeover of Kunduz Unacceptable”, *The Express Tribune*, October 1, 2015, accessed October 3, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/965466/islamabad-says-taliban-takeover-of-kunduz-unacceptable/>

⁴⁶Baqir Sajjad Syed, “FO Asks Kabul to Stop Blame Game, Seeks Cooperation”, *Dawn*, July 10, 2016, accessed July 13, 2016, [http://www.dawn.com/news/1269876/fo-asks-kabul-to-stop-blame-game-seeks-cooperation?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+dawn-news+\(Dawn+News\)](http://www.dawn.com/news/1269876/fo-asks-kabul-to-stop-blame-game-seeks-cooperation?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+dawn-news+(Dawn+News))

Pakistan's ambition to serve as a regional peacemaker and a facilitator between Taliban and Afghan government has suffered a hard blow. It appears that all the hard work by Pakistan to initiate Afghan peace process has been forgotten and multiplied by zero. Sentiments are equally hurt on both sides. Pakistan cannot take Badhaber attack lightly; the tragedy of Peshawar school attack can never be forgotten. The need is to further accelerate the joint approach towards curbing terrorist outfits instead of disowning each other at this crucial time. Getting bitter and exhibiting suspicions about each other's sincerity will only allow the hostile elements to take advantage of the situation. Both sides need to consider this aspect and act wisely.

e) The Internal Problems of Afghanistan: Tension in Unity Government, Fragile Economy, Corruption, and Appalling Security Situation

It is hard to expect any substantial progress on the peace process when the negotiating parties are facing internal schism. The Afghan Taliban have already been struggling with this problem while on the state level too, the political structure of Afghanistan is grappling with ever present and recurring rifts emerging from within. It was for this purpose that on 21st September 2014, the rival Afghan Presidential candidates Ashraf Ghani and Mohammad Abdullah signed a unity government deal⁴⁷ with the help of US Secretary of State John Kerry, aiming to have a new government based on power sharing structure. This National Unity Government (NUG) was agreed upon so that the prevailing problems of weak economy, failing security, and internal political upheavals such as corruption and internal rifts could be amicably addressed. But a major clause of the deal which suggested that the amendments would be introduced to the constitution within two years under which Chief Executive Abdullah Abudllah could formally take charge of the prime minister, is still awaiting materialization. This has made the smooth working of unity government to pass through several bottlenecks and

⁴⁷“Afghan Presidential Contenders Sign Unity Deal”, *BBC News*, September 21, 2015, accessed April 2, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29299088>

consequently the political, economic, and security situation in Afghanistan has continuously been on a decline. Such weaknesses provide ideal opportunity to the ill meaning elements that are always on the lookout for a chance to exploit the situation in their favor. The Afghan Taliban are constantly gaining strength and putting up a strong front against the Afghan government. In the absence of political cohesion within the unity government, it is unlikely that a collective and dedicated effort would be set aside for the peace process. This is why the US Secretary of the State John Kerry recently paid a surprise visit to Kabul⁴⁸ and stressed upon the need for the continuation of the unity government to avoid any further political crisis. The precarious security situation is evident from the fact that shortly after his visit, two explosions from rockets hit the diplomatic zone.⁴⁹ Not only the NUG has failed to bring any organization within its ranks, but has also been unsuccessful in keeping effective control/equation with Afghan Taliban. The NUG is also believed to be embroiled with ethno-regional biases which are putting its authenticity and credibility into question. Such instances offer distraction in the way of peace process which loses its importance for the stakeholders when they are already occupied with pursuing their own vested interests in the state polity. For the peace talks to be successful, more importantly, to be resumed, it is important that the dissenting politicians should leave their differences aside for the greater interest of everyone.

f) Need for Diplomatic Eloquence:

Sometimes even the most well thought out and careful statements turn out to be the major faux pas as has been the case with the recently issued statement by Prime Minister's senior aide Sartaj Aziz, the "confession"

⁴⁸“John Kerry Paid Surprise Visit to Kabul to Ease Tension Over Afghan Unity Pact”, *The Guardian*, April 9, 2016, accessed April 12, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/09/john-kerry-afghanistan-coalition-government-unity>

⁴⁹Toby Chopra, “Explosions Hit Afghan Capital Kabul After Kerry Visit”, *Reuters*, April 9, 2016, accessed April 15, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-blast-idUSKCN0X60R4>

that Pakistan has been providing refuge to Taliban Leadership.⁵⁰ While Pakistan is quite actively playing the role of a facilitator in the Afghan Peace Process, demonstrating utmost commitment and dedication to the restoration of peace and stability in the region, at the same time it is trying its best to utilize this opportunity to convince the world of its 'zero-tolerance' against terrorism and its abettors. The previously maintained policy of 'denial' against the presence of Afghan Taliban on Pakistani soil has been part of Pakistan's well known and often reiterated "Afghan Taliban policy". This particular stance also makes up for an important component of state's National Security since it helped Pakistan garner some level of trust and confidence regarding its genuine intentions to snuff out all terrorist elements and insurgent groups. However, it will not be incorrect to say that this policy almost faced a jarring setback owing to the recent 'public admittance' by Sartaj Aziz about the presence of Afghan Taliban leadership in Pakistan where they have been 'officially' provided 'safe haven' by the government inclusive of necessary emergency and medical facilities.⁵¹

One can't help but feel a sense of shock and confusion as to why there was a need for such rhetoric and what made a high profile serving official to issue such a statement at a time when the odds against the success of ongoing Afghan peace process are already quite high. It is believed that rhetoric of any kind, be it a verbal or a written statement, is central to politics. Even in the time of physical engagement, combat or war between the states, a parallel course of rhetoric is always a useful technique to ensure and fortify one's own position. In fact 'rhetorical maneuvering' is considered critical for the success in political disputes. Therefore, diplomatic policies in form of verbal and written statements are an essential activity that states are constantly engaged with since it is a never ending process. The major purpose behind indulging in this act at the state level is to ascertain the national security objectives,

⁵⁰ Abubaker Siddique, "Aziz Admits Pakistan Housing Afghan Taliban Leaders", *Dawn*, March 3, 2016, accessed May 18, 2016, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1243093>

⁵¹ "Afghan Taliban Leadership in Pakistan, Admits Aziz", *Dawn*, March 3, 2016, accessed May 26, 2016, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1058595/afghan-taliban-leadership-is-in-pakistan-admits-aziz/>

hence it should always be in line and consistent with the state's national security. These are the basic guidelines and the usual practice known to all in the policy making echelons and it is expected of them that they adopt a careful disposition in speech and action, which unfortunately was lacking in this particular case.

One is left to wonder if that was an effort to make Pakistan appear “in control” of the peace process. If so, what kind of influence or control does Pakistan have over Taliban leaders where the political process has more often been in favor of Afghan Taliban who seem to be in control and have been using their influence against Pakistan in full advantage, most of the time sabotaging the peace efforts. It also makes one contemplate as to why thus far Pakistan has not been able to strongly influence the Afghan Taliban insurgents despite having the capability to do so as per Sartaj Aziz.

Also it is to be kept in mind that there are rifts within the Taliban leadership and there is a big number which is either opposing or not ready to be part of the peace process. It is that particular faction within Taliban leadership which Pakistan needs to have some control over otherwise it does not merit a bragging. Pakistan is already an unfortunate victim of malevolent propaganda having been accused of and tagged as “Taliban sympathizer” by the ill meaning neighboring and Western states. Unfortunately the government has failed to come up with any response to it. There is a need for a strong rhetorical rebuttal rather than the meek admittance of these accusations just for the sake of coming across as “influential”. Despite claiming to have influence over a key actor in the Afghan peace process, the progression has been facing major hiccups. This could very well prove to be counterproductive, raising valid suspicions about the government's sincerity to the peace process. Hence the policy makers need to be extra cautious when issuing any statement be it a fact or otherwise, keeping in mind that it should never be made at the cost of hurting Pakistan's repute. There must have gone in a lot of thinking before this statement was finally issued but it further presses for the dire need for a language focused mechanism

aimed at effective political influence, without which any political or diplomatic efforts would only be partially accoutered.

Likely Scenarios

Since the process has been left in lurch for now, it could be difficult to predict any future scenarios with a degree of certainty. However, generally speaking there could be two likely scenarios with regard to the future of the talks. One can stay positive about the talks since they had been able to bring the two adversarial Afghan sides together on the same table, something which was never witnessed before. But, there is still a long way ahead before the two sides could make substantial progress on the peace process. Primarily, there is a need for strong political will and seriousness on both the sides. So, one possibility is that the process will surely move forward despite all the odds put together, including, fragmentation within the Taliban, the ongoing downward spiral in Pak-Afghan relations, India's hostile designs to stall the process etc. But in this scenario the progress will continue no matter how slow and will take a long time to ultimately reach its successful conclusion. It will slowly but surely improve the security situation in the region.

The second likely scenario could be that the anti-peace talks faction of Taliban will be able to hack the whole process and put a complete end to any further progress. There is a considerable number of Taliban who are not in favor of the talks with the Afghan government and who also view Pakistan's efforts as some sort of ruse, hence are quite skeptical. In such a case the talks do not hold any future and will be doomed to failure. Closely linked with this is another factor that the Afghan government finds most of the demands put forward by the Taliban, as unacceptable. There hasn't been much flexibility in the stance of Taliban who have been quite rigidly claiming their right. The hard positions never help in achieving a compromise. The capturing of Kunduz by Taliban also shows that they want to keep exploring the military option to gain strong position in the negotiation process. The need here is to show certain flexibility in accommodating other's point of view so that a mutually

agreed solution could be reached. These are the lingering issues which need more dedication from both sides.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The success of this process lies in the logical and pragmatic decision-making by all the stakeholders including especially Pakistan. Although Pakistan is playing the role of a moderator and facilitator ensuring that it stays an Afghan owned and Afghan led peace process, this very fact makes the biggest responsibility fall on the shoulders of Pakistani leadership. There are certain objectives that a facilitator has to follow through. The prime objective of the moderator is to keep a close eye on the development of the process, paving the way and maneuver the discussion so that it keeps moving towards a successful culmination or at least closest to the required objective, intervene when there is a likelihood of emotions getting heightened, and most of all to keep the process flowing in order to avoid a complete deadlock. It is inevitable to face hiccups in the negotiation process and peace efforts. However, the most active part is actually played by the facilitator without directly influencing the outcome and developments. As a facilitator Pakistan should carry out continuous consultation with the stakeholders while making best use of its good offices, utilizing its political and diplomatic machinery. Therefore, the ultimate goal that Pakistan has to achieve is to convince the stakeholders to keep the negotiation lines open.

In order to achieve this objective, Pakistan will need to win back the lost trust of Afghan government. In the present scenario, it will not serve any side to indulge in the blame game. Also Pakistan needs to be more cautious and needs to take rhetoric coming from Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah very seriously. This is not to suggest that Pakistan should exhibit an equally toxic gesture. For instance if one evaluates Ashraf Ghani's statement that Pakistan and Afghanistan never shared brotherly relations⁵² in literal sense then a brotherly relations might

⁵² Arshad Saheen, "Ghani Says Pak-Afghan Ties Not Brotherly", *The Express Tribune*, September 29, 2015, accessed April 12, 2016, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/964171/ghani-says-pak-afghan-ties-not-brotherly/>

still have some margin for compassion and compromise, otherwise in state to state relations usually a realistic approach centered on pursuing one's own interests at the expense of the other is a preferred and justified line of action. Afghanistan surely would not provoke Pakistan to adopt a 'non-brotherly' stance and act apathetically towards millions of Afghan refugees settled on Pakistani soil. Hence Afghanistan should probably revisit its present approach while Pakistan definitely should demand a rational explanation of this statement from Afghanistan or take an initiative to clear the air out and win the trust back, as no side can afford to lose the other. Pakistan should also try to identify and make public all the possible factors which might have caused this 180 degrees change in Ashraf Ghani's behavior.

Having said all that, it is true that Pakistan needs to do some self-analysis too. Does the distinction between good and bad Taliban really work for Pakistan's national interests? It is clear that officially Pakistan has maintained that it will never allow, sponsor, and abet terrorism anywhere in any form. Then why did the peace efforts which started off on a positive trajectory seems to be ending up in skepticism? What really went wrong? It is convenient and sometimes logical too to put blame on India but this can't work every time. Both sides need to learn to take responsibility of their actions. While Pakistan needs to be more stringent when it comes to its position on Taliban and Haqqani group, Afghanistan should also stop putting all the blame on Pakistan and refrain from issuing irrational and irresponsible statements at international forums. Why should such sentiments be broadcasted and highlighted when the exploiters are waiting to get a chance to further spoil the situation? This might be seen by them as an open invitation to intercede and spew out anti-Pakistan sentiments in Kabul. Would not such assertions jeopardize the regional security situation? Afghanistan should seriously consider whether it can afford to pursue this whimsical and impulsive diplomacy.

As George Simmel very aptly put it in 1955 that International society is 'sewn together' by cross cutting conflicts.⁵³ Hence clashes are inevitable but how to recover from them and handle the situation amicably is the real test of nerves. The only solution to resolve distrust is through mutual concerted efforts. Also if the anti-dialogue factors in Afghanistan are not dealt with properly, the sustainability and progress on the peace process cannot be guaranteed. The future of the peace in Afghanistan will remain bleak with adverse effect for Pakistan too. A strong political will is required on both sides of the border, more on Afghan side to let the trust be cultivated. Otherwise all the stakeholders could be in for a long haul without much hope for the efforts to materialize successfully.

⁵³Lewis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, (New York: Routledge, 1956), p. 80.