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QUEST FOR PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

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I still cannot understand how we, the international community, and the Afghan Government have managed to arrive at a situation in which everything is coming together in 2014 — elections, new President, economic transition, military transition and all this — whereas the negotiations for the peace process have not really started.

— Former French diplomat Bernard Bajolet, Kabul, April 2013.⁽¹⁾

Introduction

After more than three decades of war, Afghanistan today remains a very complex society, struggling within an unstable political and security landscape. Several years of fighting and anarchy has left it fragmented and deeply factionalized. On the one hand there is the conflicting relationship between the Afghan Government and people with allied countries; and on the other, combating insurgents have paved the way for social and economic breakdown of the society. At each level various groups and factions are locked in deep-rooted, multifaceted conflicts, mostly striving for capturing a share of power or resources. The outcome is massive collateral damage and a high rate of warfare misconduct. Consequently, concrete and sustainable development, the most desired element of the Afghan peace process, seems lost, even within the much touted “2014 Withdrawal” policy. Certain ambiguities regarding the 2014 handing over, and the transitional phase with future security forces, pose formidable challenges. Most of the

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post-2014 projections are pessimistic, and raise serious concerns, such as insurgents recapturing power, societal breakdown and re-ignition of civil war. However, the unwavering determination and perseverance of the Afghan people, especially the youth, is seen as a glimmer of hope.

This study presents a chronology of various efforts made over the last decade in hopes of achieving peace, and analyses the efforts currently being made. It attempts to give insight into President Karzai's policy of Peace and Reconciliation, explores the dynamics of central and influential stakeholders, and identifies the role played by various members of the international community, especially Pakistan.

Peace

The terms "peace process" or "peacebuilding" have been used broadly since the early 90s. The concept of post-conflict peacebuilding is generally defined as "action to identify and support structures which tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse into conflict."⁽²⁾ Peacebuilding involves a wide range of approaches, processes and stages involved in transformation towards more sustainable and peaceful relationships, governance modes and structures.⁽³⁾ The peace process can be seen as "the diplomatic and political efforts to negotiate a resolution to a conflict, especially a long-standing conflict." Harold Saunders described peace process as "a political process in which conflicts are resolved by peaceful means. They are a mixture of politics, diplomacy, changing relationships, negotiation, mediation, and dialogue in both official and unofficial arenas."⁽⁴⁾ In this regard an effective peace mechanism and negotiations are desirable and worth pursuing despite the risks and fears of failure attached with the process.

An unfortunate reason for the stalling and slow-pace of the peace process was the mismanaged US policy that gave an opportunity to the ousted Taliban to regain a solid foothold in the country. Now, an important task for the policymakers is to identify a peace model or method of peaceful negotiations which focuses on greater peacebuilding in Afghanistan. This will shift the focus from individual to national level and from personal to the political sphere. The culture of war has to be replaced by a culture of

peace. A consensus-oriented mechanism needs to be formed for this purpose, to help pave way for a form of “national reconciliation.” A two-way peace and reconciliation approach is a must, at national and regional levels.

Reconciliation and reintegration

Kriesberg defines reconciliation as the “process of developing a mutual conciliatory accommodation between antagonistic or formerly antagonistic persons or groups. It often refers to a relatively amicable relationship, typically established after a rupture in the relationship involving one-sided or mutual infliction of extreme injury.”⁽⁵⁾ The concept of reintegration has been viewed narrowly by both practical and theoretical thinkers who traditionally focus on economic and social assimilation into civilian life as the goal of reintegration. Acknowledgement of the importance of political assimilation of ex-combatants was missing. Hence, it was proposed that reintegration should cover three aspects. First, the target group should be ex-combatants and their families. Second, the aim of the reintegration process should be their economic, political and social assimilation into civil society. Finally, the method should be broad enough to include different forms of reintegration other than programmes and projects organized by international donors. Following this, reintegration is seen as “a societal process aiming at the economic, political, and social assimilation of ex-combatants and their families into civil society.”⁽⁶⁾

The central negotiators

The two key actors central to Afghan peace negotiations are the Afghan Taliban and the Afghanistan Government.

The Afghan Taliban

Identity

For the past few years there has been talk of ‘good’ or ‘moderate’ Taliban with whom the international community and domestic opponents have been willing to reach an agreement. However, the question is, do moderate Taliban actually exist? And if yes, who are these Taliban? Are they the same old traditionalists reemerging after defeat? Or, are they new resistance groups, operating under the banner of Taliban? Between 2001

and 2007, 'moderates' and 'extremists' were indistinguishable politically and legally. In American political discourse the term 'moderate' meant 'good' and applied to those who assented to American policies while those who did not, were termed 'bad' or 'radicals.'⁽⁷⁾

The 'moderate Taliban' category gave an identity to constituencies within Taliban who sought to build a state. Their ambition depended on foreign helpers who did not share their ideology. Such claims of moderation became the calling cards for hopeful intermediaries and they formed a framework for negotiations with the international community.⁽⁸⁾

The labels of Taliban and *neo-Taliban* have lately been used to define the movement. A new style of violence, more aggressive in nature, has emerged on the surface. The two groups, the original Taliban movement and the neo-Taliban, share one principle despite having several differences. Both base the legitimacy of their cause in the enforcement of *Sharia* as the divine law in Afghanistan.⁽⁹⁾ The term neo-Taliban is recognized to encompass the former and current agendas, players, and engagement strategies.⁽¹⁰⁾ The neo-Taliban can be divided ideologically into two groups. The first one aligns itself with Al-Qaeda and follows views adopted by Mullah Omar and radical Taliban. Whereas the other group seems to have opted for traditional Pashtun roots, trying to become a voice of not only the Pashtuns, but of all the traditionalist Muslims in Afghanistan. This category draws its support from a large number of alienated Pashtuns. It has gradually become more dominant by integrating foreign fighters into its ranks.⁽¹¹⁾

Some within the neo-Taliban ranks are more moderate, seeking to become a voice in the political dialogue.⁽¹²⁾ The neo-Taliban adopted a more flexible and less traditional attitude towards imported techniques and technologies from their Arab jihadist allied guests as a result of their influence. The orthodox style was radically shifted with the use of broader ways of documenting, interviewing and broadcasting their propaganda through video technology. The Neo-Taliban got deeply assimilated in the international jihadist movement after 2001. The internationalization of Taliban ideology reveals their strategies as it enabled strong external support to them, in particular financial support for

their mounting insurgency.⁽¹³⁾ The resurgence of Taliban is believed to be multidimensional and based on an uncoordinated alliance of forces, such as crestfallen political personalities, factions based on centuries old rivalries, and foreign interests. Their financial support network, including drug lords and warlords, helps further their cause.⁽¹⁴⁾

Composition

Under the neo-Taliban banner, and in general, Taliban are not a cohesive entity. They are highly decentralized and disordered, horizontally and vertically at both the top and lower levels. Despite their loyalty to Mullah Omar's leadership and his *Shura*, Taliban are more of a factionalized movement, now further divided among the old and new bands. They have been able to become a challenging force due to the larger political and security vacuum created by the Karzai administration in the country, which allowed the Taliban to gain both strategic and operational leverage against their opponents.⁽¹⁵⁾

Insurgent groups

The Afghan Taliban ranks are primarily directed by the Quetta Shura Taliban, headed by Mullah Omar, who calls himself *Amir-ul-Momineen* (Leader of the Faithful). Mullah Omar and his group still continue to call themselves the legitimate government of Afghanistan, which they call the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan'. The Shura's operations have systematically spread from Southern Afghanistan to the West and North of the country, and it is by far the most active volatile group in Afghanistan. Virtually, all enemy groups operating in the country have sworn allegiance to Mullah Omar.⁽¹⁶⁾ Among the affiliated groups the most prominent and aggressive are the Haqqani and Mansur Networks. All these groups are being pursued by international and Afghan actors to join the peace accord.⁽¹⁷⁾

The Haqqani network headed by Sirajuddin Haqqani is one of Afghanistan's most experienced insurgent groups. Although the group also comes under the larger umbrella of the Quetta Shura, it maintains its own command and control and line of operations. The network has engaged in various violent attacks inside Afghanistan, and has been a straining factor in Pakistan-US relations. Lately the organization has been

intensely targeted by US drones that have succeeded in wiping off some of the top commanders.⁽¹⁸⁾

The other influential group is operating under the command of Abdul Latif Mansur and is an Afghanistan-based network, leading insurgency in the East of the country. Mansur had served as agriculture minister under the Taliban regime. Closely connected with the Haqqani network, his group is actively fighting the US forces, and is known to have thwarted the American hunt for Bin Laden and other Al-Qaeda leaders during Operation Anaconda in March 2002.⁽¹⁹⁾

A comeback

In 2007-09, the Taliban had regained the capacity to assassinate top government officials. By 2008 Taliban also altered their strategy of targeting people, and started targeting only those affiliated with the government, international forces and Afghan National Security forces. At the same time, the general public opinion also began to shift from favouring the government and foreigners' strategy, and they started to willingly or unwillingly support the insurgents and distanced themselves from the government, in order to keep their communities safe.⁽²⁰⁾

Basic positions & demands of the insurgents

The insurgent groups have a long list of demands to be met prior to any peace accord. The Taliban do not recognize the Afghan Constitution; do not recognize the Afghan Government as a legitimate one; they view the US and NATO as their primary enemies.⁽²¹⁾ Their preconditions for peace talks are:

- Removal and no further presence of foreign military forces in Afghanistan, apart from temporary peacekeeping forces⁽²²⁾
- To discuss only isolated issues such as prisoner exchanges and liaison office issues with the US and NATO since they are enemies⁽²³⁾
- Security for insurgents and their families particularly in the South and Southeast of Afghanistan, from all the operating military forces, International Security Assistance Force, Afghan National Security Forces, and the Afghan National Security Directorate

- Recognition of Taliban as legitimate political actors in Afghanistan by the international community
- Removal of their key leaders from the United Nation's terrorists' list
- Enforcement of Islamic law in the country
- Removal of corrupt Afghan officials, like local commanders and government officials, exiling some of the most violent warlords, as identified by the Taliban⁽²⁴⁾

The initially reluctant Haqqani network later showed willingness to participate in peace talks with the US, if Mullah Omar approved. But, at the same time, they asserted that they would still continue to attack the coalition forces in Afghanistan with the aim of establishing an Islamic state.⁽²⁵⁾

Another noteworthy opposition group, the Hizb-e-Islami is led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The Hizb showed a shift towards participating in peace talks and unlike the Taliban recognized the current Afghan Government as a legitimate negotiating party. However, it set its own preconditions for talks, including:

- Fundamental reforms in the electoral law
- Withdrawal of all foreign troops
- Constitutional reforms⁽²⁶⁾

The Afghan Government

The Afghanistan Government headed by President Hamid Karzai is dominated by the former Northern Alliance. The group's supporters are also positioned in top bureaucratic set-ups, including the Foreign Office, Afghan Police and Afghan National Army. The Alliance and President Karzai have faced criticism for encouraging an over-representation of ethnic minorities, primarily Uzbeks and Tajiks. The majority Pashtuns believe that they are not adequately represented at higher institutional levels. In the beginning, the new administration had a positive standing with the people, who appreciated its efforts in framing the Constitution, holding elections and leading the government setup. However, the Karzai administration soon began to lose support due to its inefficiency and allegations of corruption. This further enabled the Taliban to stage a

gradual comeback starting with the rural areas and small towns, where the US and Karzai Government not only struggled to extend its jurisdiction⁽²⁷⁾ but also failed to win the hearts and minds of the people.

Turning point in Afghan strategy

We are still not out of the darkness, not yet safe against threats; [...] we have yet not achieved our best desire of full security and individual safety for our citizens. The war on terror has not been won as per the desire of the people. The international community could not deliver on the purpose it came to take Afghanistan to its destination.”

— President Karzai, addressing Traditional Loya Jirga, 16 November 2011.⁽²⁸⁾

With US resources and attention diverted to Iraq and the resurgence of defeated and discredited Taliban in Afghanistan by 2005-06, delaying reconciliation efforts was a mistake that gave insurgents a chance to influence Afghan affairs.⁽²⁹⁾ Realizing the missing element in resolution of the national crisis and collateral damage from military strategy, President Karzai opened up to the possibility of devising a strategy around political negotiations with the Taliban. In 2009, in his inaugural speech, he outlined his policy priorities where peace and reconciliation was presented as key focus areas. He publicly invited the insurgents to voluntarily return and accept the Constitution of the country.⁽³⁰⁾

National Consultative Peace Jirga (NCPJ)

After setting the policy goal, Karzai began working on mobilizing public support for the peace and reconciliation programme. For this purpose a three-day National Consultative Peace Jirga (NCPJ) was convened, in Kabul in June 2010. The Jirga, a Pashtun tradition, is an assembly of influential leaders held to resolve disputes. The NCPJ was held to discuss prospects of peace negotiations and reconciliation with the Taliban.⁽³¹⁾ A former president of Afghanistan and head of Jamiat-e-Islami, Burhanuddin Rabbani, acted as the Jirga Chairman. Around 1,600 delegates from 34 provinces, representing both government and civil society, participated in the jirga. The delegates included parliamentarians, cabinet members, representatives of different tribal and ethnic groups, as well as members of refugee communities, religious councils, ulema, civil

society activists, women groups and others. However, the main political opposition bloc, Northern Front leader Abdullah Abdullah remained critical of the extent of true representation of Afghan society, and chose not to attend the Jirga.⁽³²⁾

The legitimacy of the Jirga was also questioned by many others, as the participants were mainly Karzai supporters and Taliban opponents. The most crucial parties to peace negotiations — the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, and Hezb-i-Islami of Hekmatyar — were not invited by Karzai.⁽³³⁾ For this, Karzai cannot be held completely responsible as at that time the Western supporters, particularly the US, discouraged any negotiations with the Taliban leadership, as they were confident about reversing the situation by gaining leverage over Taliban in the battlefield.⁽³⁴⁾ Karzai was in a challenging situation; on the one hand he was being asked to reach out to insurgents, and on the other he had to keep the US and other Western allies satisfied that he was not appeasing the terrorist factions. The Afghan public was also visibly sceptical of the peace plan, probably due to the failure of past peace efforts. In 2005, the Afghan Government, in coordination with the US military, had launched a programme ‘Proceay-e Takheem-e Solha’ (Strengthening Peace Programme, known as PTS), that sought to reintegrate former insurgents. The programme suffered from weak management, lack of resources and political will.⁽³⁵⁾ Another outreach effort was launched in Wardak and Helmand provinces in 2008. The Afghanistan Social Outreach Programme (ASOP) was actually not part of governance framework.⁽³⁶⁾ Likewise, many local initiatives were taken with tribal backing also to reintegrate groups or individuals from militias other than Taliban forces but these efforts had been uncoordinated and unstructured.⁽³⁷⁾

Resolution document

The Consultative Jirga did manage to achieve an agreement on the primary goal of the event — to build a domestic consensus on the conditions under which direct negotiations between the Afghan Government and insurgent groups should take place.⁽³⁸⁾ The gathering adopted a 16-point resolution, outlining steps for the reconciliation and reintegration process. The resolution, divided into three sections, was further sub-divided

into individual articles: Understanding, Negotiation and Agreement for Sustainable Peace, Framework for Talks with the Disaffected, and Developing Mechanism for Negotiation with the Disaffected.⁽³⁹⁾

The first section included seven articles that call on all parties for cooperating in the peace process by avoiding issues that can harm national unity and limit the reconciliation initiative. This section implied turning the outcomes of the Jirga into a national strategy. The second section appealed to the Afghan Government and international troops to release people whose detention was allegedly based on inaccurate information, and called for removing their names from the blacklist. It also sought security and safety guarantees for those willing to quit insurgency and for speedy training of Afghan National Security Forces to enable them to lead military operations. The third section outlined steps for establishing a High Peace Council to oversee the implementations of the Jirga's resolutions at district and provincial levels. A special committee was proposed to deal with the issue of prisoners' release.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Hence, the outlines of Karzai's two-level reconciliation and reintegration peace plan first offered an attractive proposal to Taliban to have their names removed from the international terrorist blacklist⁽⁴¹⁾ with permission for some to become a part of mainstream politics whereas top Taliban leadership could live securely in exile outside Afghanistan, though only if the Taliban accepted the legitimacy of the Afghan Constitution, opted to end insurgency and snapped ties with Al-Qaeda. The second part of the plan, greatly supported by the international community, focused on the reintegration of lower-level Taliban foot soldiers that had joined insurgency for financial or non-ideological reasons and would be willing to quit in return for suitable compensation.⁽⁴²⁾

Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP)

In response to the NCPJ resolution, the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP) was created. On 20 July 2010, at the Kabul Conference the international community endorsed the programme followed by issuing of a Joint Order to the federal ministries and provincial governors for the implementation of APRP.⁽⁴³⁾ This

conference was hosted by the Afghan Government and co-chaired by the United Nations, as an attempt to renew commitment for an Afghan-led national agenda of emphasizing good governance and enhanced security prospects in addition to the implementation of Priority National Programmes.⁽⁴⁴⁾

High Peace Council (HPC)

To lead and manage the implementation of APRP, the Afghanistan High Peace Council (HPC), a 70-member body, was formed in October 2011 through a presidential decree. The Council is composed of Jihadi, political and community leaders, religious scholars, tribal elders, civil society and nine women representatives with the directive to lead nation-wide support for reconciliation and reintegration under the peace process.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Some of the former Taliban were also made members of the High Peace Council.⁽⁴⁶⁾ The Council was initially chaired by former Afghan president and Northern Alliance figure Burhanuddin Rabbani, until his assassination. In April 2012, Burhanuddin's son Salahuddin Rabbani was named the Chief Negotiator and Chairman of the Council by President Karzai.⁽⁴⁷⁾ An important reason behind both the Rabbanis' appointment was to gain acceptance by political opposition for any future accords.

The HPC is not confined to national level alone and has reached out for support to neighbouring and regional powers. According to the Government's peace strategy, peace efforts will be made at two levels:

- 1) The strategic and political level; where reconciliation talks are held with senior insurgency members as well as mobilization of regional cooperation and international support to the Afghan-led peace process
- 2) The national and sub-national level; where the Afghan Government, HPC, civil society, and all stakeholders work to build a national support base and consensus in Afghanistan and manage reintegration of ex-combatants.

The HPC manages peace efforts at a national level and peace committees lead the efforts at provincial level with provincial governors, with assistance of Provincial Peace Committees.⁽⁴⁸⁾

In the beginning, an important component of the Afghan Peace Programme directly helped about 25,000 people, reintegrating some and helping other community members through small grant and line ministry projects covering sectors like water, agriculture, infrastructural development and vocational training.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Operationally, APRP's goal for the first year was to initiate programme activities in eight provinces and enrol up to 1,000 reintegrating people,⁽⁵⁰⁾ for which a \$94 million annual budget for the HPC was approved. By the end of December 2012, the APRP had officially reintegrated about 5,900 insurgents who left the battlefield and reconciled with their communities.⁽⁵¹⁾ The challenging task then and now is the creation of meaningful employment opportunities for them, so that they are not tempted or forced to return to insurgent ranks. Another challenge for the government is to ensure security and safety for those who have left the ranks of combatants to join the peace process.⁽⁵²⁾

Despite nation-wide support to the peace process, the HPC has been criticized since its formation. The reaction of the media, public, civil society and even parliamentarians has been critical of the Council. One of the major concerns of the Afghan critics was the composition of the HPC which appears to be dominated by warlords. A significant number of the Council members can be considered to have 'war expertise' rather than 'peace expertise', a fact that has had an adverse effect in building trust among Afghans and the international community. Not only that, most members also hold other governmental commissions, which can slow down the peace process, leading to its failure in the end.⁽⁵³⁾

There was a negative reaction towards Rabbani being chosen as the head of the Council. As Muhammad Sa'id Niazi, a member of the HPC, said Rabbani's appointment was not a step forward in reintegrating the insurgents, rather it would strengthen Taliban's rejection of all attempts made by the government in initiating peace talks, because most HPC members were involved in the war against Taliban. In fact, ten organizational networks wrote a proposal to the government for replacing the HPC members accused of human rights violations and suspected of war crimes with people having expertise in conflict resolution, mediation and reconciliation. These civil society networks emphasized the role of the civil society in decision making, and stressed the

need to include national interest, justice and women's rights ideals in the decision making process.⁽⁵⁴⁾

Karzai's fears of ownership & irrelevance backfire

Since the beginning of his first term in office President Hamid Karzai has been distrustful of American, British, European and even UN diplomats, when it came to conducting talks with the Taliban. Karzai expelled British adviser to the European Union mission, Michael Semple, and senior British UN official, Mervyn Patterson, for engaging in talks with the Taliban in Helmand province, without authorization from Helmand Governor.⁽⁵⁵⁾ The diplomats were also allegedly supplying cash and weapons to the Taliban. Both UN and British intelligence agency MI6 secretly held talks with the insurgents, believing it was possible to separate hardcore leadership from non-ideological commanders. This created a rift between the Afghan Government and the foreign powers involved.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Similarly, Karzai's suspicions of US became a reality when US backchannel propositions to the Taliban became known. One noteworthy example of US-Karzai rift is the opening of Taliban's Doha office, also known as the Qatar process (to be discussed in detail later). The event was considered a diplomatic milestone finally aimed at pushing the peace process forward after twelve years of violence; However, the process was disrupted by President Karzai's boycott; he was afraid that if the initiative worked out well he would be ditched by the Americans besides being treated as irrelevant by the Taliban.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Karzai has expressed the wish that Taliban are made to understand that the peace process would eventually shift to Afghanistan. He mentioned three principles in the context of HPC members' visit to Qatar for peace talks. He said that the Qatar talks must be moved to Afghanistan immediately, they should bring an end to violence, and must not become a tool for a 'third country' — by which he meant Pakistan — to exploit Afghanistan.⁽⁵⁸⁾

The underlying fear behind these conditions appears to be that the Taliban would gain attention and increasing legitimacy through direct talks with the US and thus expose

Karzai as being ineffective. Karzai reacted by blaming disruption of the peace process on the US and Pakistan. Karzai's sense of personal insecurity and the mistrust between him and the US added to the weakening bilateral relations. President Karzai, already disliked within the country, knew that he was not liked in the US and many Western capitals either. The trust level is very low on both sides. Karzai and his close associates don't trust the US as a reliable partner and suspect it is collaborating with both the Taliban and Pakistan, seeking to cut deals with them behind his back. Karzai complains that the West hijacked the Afghan peace process to strengthen his opponents and malign or undermine his government.⁽⁵⁹⁾

He also accuses the Americans of secretly engineering his political downfall, especially since the 2009 elections in Afghanistan. The former US special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, and the then US ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry were actively playing backchannel roles to politically depose Karzai. They held meetings with his opponents and supported them in presidential campaign rallies. Karzai was aware of the American scheming and retaliated by striking deals with various warlords to win their support in elections.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Hence, it was due to his distrust that the Obama Administration failed to win his support for ensuring cordial bilateral ties. And it was one of the reasons for the delay in signing the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). Karzai keeps adding conditions to the deal, despite being aware of the significance of the agreement and country's dependence on US military and financial aid.

Conditions & demands of the Afghan Government

The most important demands of the Karzai government from US and the international community are,

- a. Continuation of post-withdrawal financial aid, at least four to five billion dollars a year⁽⁶¹⁾
- b. Starting of a practical peace process which would stop foreigners benefiting from the continuation of war in Afghanistan⁽⁶²⁾

- c. Peacekeeping forces provided by the international community and US until Afghan National Security Forces are capable of taking security control of their country. This demand is still pending under the BSA, that would assure presence of a certain number of international troops post withdrawal to train Afghan Security Forces in counterterrorism operations.⁽⁶³⁾

Peace process: Karzai vs Taliban

Peace negotiations are imperative, yet the main parties to negotiations in Afghanistan have conflicting interests that none seems willing to compromise on. The Taliban leadership claims to be fighting a ‘jihad’, with the aim of re-imposing its government in Afghanistan, based on its religious and ideological beliefs. The Taliban have been completely unwilling to negotiate on anything other than the ‘divine goal’ of enforcing *Shariah*. This is not acceptable to the government or to the Afghan people.

In contrast, the Karzai administration is fighting for a democratic, representative government and for its own survival, for which it has even offered power-sharing deals to the insurgents, if they agree to lay down arms.⁽⁶⁴⁾

Karzai began voicing his concerns and softened stance towards the Taliban, once he realized that he was just an option for the US and had become isolated internationally. Relations between his administration and the Taliban have always been complex. Karzai opted for mild diplomacy while pursuing reconciliation with them. It was reported that after Taliban’s ouster in the beginning, he even held a meeting with the Taliban militants in Kandahar to discuss possible conditions for their endorsement of the peace process. Kabul officials also explained to all militants that they could join the new government and could work on key administrative posts, without the fear of being persecuted. But seemingly, Taliban leaders, who refer to Karzai as West’s puppet, refused to join and accept conditions of the foreign countries involved in Afghanistan.⁽⁶⁵⁾

What the top Taliban leadership sees in Karzai’s peace invitation is a call for surrender, rather than talks. Still, Karzai remained determined and tactically worked to transform the peace initiative from Western-led collaboration, to Afghanization of peace

mission where he empowers the Afghans to lead not only national security tasks but the peace process as well. ⁽⁶⁶⁾

Karzai worked to negotiate a deal with top insurgent leaders or mid-level figures, even if senior heads were not willing. ⁽⁶⁷⁾ The key objective of including the top leadership in the reconciliation talks was to ensure its implementation since it would be easier to convince low-level fighters to give up insurgency. Also, the foot soldiers or lower-level fighters were under strict instructions by the top commanders to refrain from engaging personally in peace talks. ⁽⁶⁸⁾ Gradually, Karzai became daring in his outreach, and tried various tactics from publicly calling the Taliban ‘brothers’, to offering them power-sharing arrangements with amendment in the Constitution. Many experts believe that this reflects the government’s willingness to compromise on those constitutional articles that are not in line with militant’s ideology. ⁽⁶⁹⁾

On 10 March 2007, President Karzai signed a broader amnesty plan, the National Stability and Reconciliation Bill. Despite heavy criticism from all sides, this bill exempted all combatants and parties involved in armed conflict, from *jihad* to civil war, including the Taliban, from prosecution. Not just this, the Bill also provides them immunity from any criticism. Since the 2005 parliamentary elections, former Taliban under the label of moderates were appointed at key posts in ministries, both federal and provincial. From Afghan Government’s perspective the Amnesty Bill was a step towards an inclusive vision of reconciliation. ⁽⁷⁰⁾

From reconciliation & reintegration to power-sharing

Theorists like Caroline Hatzell and Matthew Hoddie hold that negotiations, with a view to power-sharing, would be optimal means of resolving internal conflicts. Both stress the significance of creating power-sharing or power-dividing institutions. Groups must have a means, other than relying on the use of force, for resolving their disagreements. ⁽⁷¹⁾ The concept is being mentioned here to shed light on Karzai’s attempts for bringing insurgent leaders to the negotiating table, by including power-sharing approach into the reconciliation and reintegration strategy.

The ambitious roadmap drafted by Karzai’s HPC clearly penned down his approach of accommodating the Taliban and other armed groups into the political and

social mainstream. Step three of the roadmap gives an insight into transforming the Taliban and other militant groups into political movements. Once it is done, these groups will be encouraged to participate in elections. The Taliban and other groups would also be facilitated to enter into the power structure of the state through non-elected positions at different levels. This way they will become a part of Afghan society once again.⁽⁷²⁾

However, analytically speaking, in Afghanistan it is difficult to envisage a functioning power-sharing institution, given the reality of intense animosity between the warring parties with their ambitious political designs. No matter whatever the political power-sharing settlement between the Government and the insurgents, it should be understood that safeguarding the people's interests against any oligarchic or extremist setup has to be a supreme objective.⁽⁷³⁾

Karzai's dual play

Karzai's anti-US oratory to gain support of the Taliban by pressurizing Americans has not made him any more popular. His statements against the international community and the US were, in fact, criticised. At the same time, Karzai was perceived to be acting like a 'guest in his country', who has 'no power'. His criticism of airstrikes on Afghans was rejected by the public as being merely symbolic. These factors left the Taliban and the common Afghans considering Karzai and his government weak and ineffective. This impression has not only encouraged top Taliban leadership to step up their movement further but also shattered the hopes and confidence of the Afghans. They seem even more scared for their future in case the regime collapses.⁽⁷⁴⁾

The tensions between Karzai and the Obama Administration have been exploited by Taliban. A paramount example is Karzai's backtracking over the signing of the BSA, despite the fact that the Loya Jirga had given its approval. The Taliban leadership, who "don't want any occupier in their country,"⁽⁷⁵⁾ has appreciated Karzai's delay in signing the security deal. However, the HPC remains critical of this course of action, and Salahuddin Rabbani held that Karzai's decision had made the insurgents stronger than pro-peace elements.⁽⁷⁶⁾ Some among the Afghan leaders speculated that this might lead to a political breakthrough with the Taliban who are willing to join the peace process,

whereas others believe that the prospects of a negotiated peace settlement after a decade of war have been further reduced.

The internal and external legitimization given to Taliban had made President Karzai so apprehensive that he was trying to grab negotiating reins, by holding secret talks with certain insurgent figures before the presidential elections in April. Simultaneously, he was seeking to install a trusted successor, so that the shaky political structure doesn't collapse, giving the Taliban an easy return to power — hence playing a gamble.⁽⁷⁷⁾

However, Karzai's attempts to appease the Taliban seem ill-informed as the Taliban see him and his regime as puppets serving the interests of the 'Western Crusaders.' "Moreover, no matter how much Karzai keeps trying to cosy up with the Taliban, whatever criticism he keeps prompting against US that make him sound like Taliban, it won't put him in Taliban's good books. Since their removal Taliban have seen Karzai's face and he would be the first to be thrown out if the Taliban returns to Kabul."⁽⁷⁸⁾ This might perhaps be the reason that Karzai wants to negotiate and come to an understanding with the top Taliban leadership, so that he and his family or close ones are fully protected, secure and well rewarded, as for the past decade despite being placed in the position of head of State, he, in fact, has remained rootless.⁽⁷⁹⁾

The influential negotiators

The negotiators considered influential by the central parties to the peace process, the Afghan Government and the Taliban, are Pakistan and the US. President Karzai recently said that peace in his country directly depended upon and lay in the hands of America and Pakistan.⁽⁸⁰⁾

While the Afghan Government would clearly make key decisions and lead the process, the role of the US and Pakistan in the Afghan peace process cannot be ignored. Their participation is imperative, as even though the US is preparing for an exit, it remains a tangible party to the Afghan conflict. The Taliban don't recognize the Karzai Government, call him a US puppet, and prefer negotiating directly with the US. Washington is also interested in discussing peace settlement with both the Afghan

Government and Taliban, as any agreement will require the support of the international community, and the US would remain to play a significant role in mustering security and financial backing.

Pakistan is important because it has been instrumental in convincing Taliban to agree to engage in direct talks with the UN Security Council as well as the US. Furthermore, the Afghan Taliban are said to have sanctuaries in the country's volatile border areas. They are active in waging war and violence with the support of Pakistani insurgents on Afghans and foreign troops from their sanctuaries. So to confront the insurgency, Pakistan's support and assistance for peace settlement is highly significant. Therefore, an Afghan-led and -owned process needs to be strategized in a way that allows Pakistan and US to play a supporting role, to assist and help the Afghan administration manage issues like future governance, future US presence in the country and Pak-Afghan bilateral relations.

The United States

As we reassure our partners that our relationships and engagement in Afghanistan will continue after the military transition in 2014, we should underscore that we have long-term strategic interests in the broader region... As the United States enters a new phase of engagement in Afghanistan, we must lay the foundation for a long-term strategy that sustains our security gains and protects US interests...

— US Secretary of State John Kerry,
then Chair of Senate Foreign Relations Committee⁽⁸¹⁾

Afghanistan is geographically located at the crossroads of the Middle Eastern, the South Asian and the South East Asian fault lines. Strategically speaking, Afghanistan sits at the strategic pivot where influential Russia, growing China, Iran and within South Asia Pakistan and India are easily reachable. This alone makes Afghanistan important for the US. The post-9/11 global war against terrorism brought US an opening towards its already buoyant national interests through Afghanistan in the region. To be precise, the Afghan war with US physical presence in the country generated new sets of opportunities

for extending American strategic influence, ambitions of expanding its hegemonic hubris across the post-Soviet space usually referred to as “the Stans” by seeking to gain unlimited regional access, not to be lost easily in future. Although in pursuit of these interests the region has been sowed with inflammable conflicts and future instability. The US administration looks at Afghanistan from broader national interest perspective.⁽⁸²⁾

Mindful of its broader interests in the region, America has multiple goals in Afghanistan, including:

- Preventing Afghanistan from becoming a sanctuary for al-Qaeda and/or an ally of al-Qaeda as the country was under the Taliban
- Creating a stable, autonomous and friendly state in Afghanistan
- Preventing Afghan violence from further destabilizing Pakistan
- Preserving NATO alliance’s credibility
- Preservation of democratic and human rights values for Afghans⁽⁸³⁾
- To safeguard the gains of all US past efforts by damage control and preserving on the ground situation⁽⁸⁴⁾

The first goal was also one of the reasons that prompted the US under president Bush to invade Afghanistan and still is the primary objective under Obama Administration. Realising the primary objectives in Afghanistan might, however, compromise American ideals of democracy and human rights. The American and NATO demands from the Taliban prior to any peace deal have been;

- Acceptance of the Afghan Constitution
- Recognition of the Afghan Government
- Renunciation of their ties with Al-Qaeda
- End of terrorist and insurgent activities for a successful transition of control to Afghan forces⁽⁸⁵⁾

The most challenging part for US administration in resolving the peace issue had been to bring the Karzai government and the Taliban together to initiate a negotiating process. The mistrust between the Karzai Government and the Taliban has created major hurdles for the peace initiative. The weak and corrupt government, expressing anti-US sentiment over the past few years, has also created difficulties for American interests in

the country. On top of this, US decision of pursuing counterinsurgency policy along with NATO allies and the administration's reservations over Karzai's policies have worsened the situation.

Diverging interests & strategy

The reconciliation and reintegration policies, two basic planks of the Afghan peace process strategy, have been adequately understood according to US and Afghan Government's peculiar interests. The Obama Administration supported the peace Jirga after intensive discussions with the Afghan officials, yet they remained sceptical of the reconciliation strategy. Subsequently, the US agreed to explore peace negotiations or settlement with the Taliban, though differences persisted over with whom the talks would be held. While the US backed the reintegration of low-to-mid level Taliban fighters into mainstream society, it was hesitant to endorse inclusion of top Taliban leadership in the process. As for holding talks with Mullah Omar, Karzai officially expressed willingness to reach out to him, whereas the US considering him a "fugitive", wanted him to be excluded from peace talks and denied any future political leverage.⁽⁸⁶⁾

Reintegration, as viewed by Karzai, is to make efforts to provide incentives to insurgents to tempt them into renouncing fighting. As for US, it is only recently that it opened up to engaging higher insurgent leadership into the reintegration process. Initially, the 'US Military Field Manual on Counterinsurgency Operations' described reintegration as a form of "golden surrender" and "a way out for insurgents who have lost the desire to continue the struggle."⁽⁸⁷⁾ Robert Gates views reintegration as getting the foot soldiers to decide that they don't want to be a part of the Taliban any more. General McChrystal said it addressed mid-to-low level insurgent fighters by offering eligible insurgents reasonable incentives to stop fighting and return to normalcy, possibly by including the employment or protection provisions. This approach was aimed at weakening and dividing the insurgents.⁽⁸⁸⁾ Hence, during the 2010 London Conference, the international community was clear on applying the reintegration programme to foot soldiers and local leaders once they renounced violence, but remained reluctant over reconciliation policy.

Washington's change of heart

Although reintegration and reconciliation are two distinct concepts yet they have the potential to be pursued together. The US strategy was to engage in peace talks with the insurgent leadership, while NATO commanders would successfully engage and co-opt local insurgent leaders in the field to an extent that local efforts effectively break away lower-level commanders from their forces, which would then put pressure on the top insurgent leadership to negotiate. There were various reasons for the swing.

First, shifting loyalties among Afghan insurgents was hard to achieve because Taliban insurgency is rooted not in ethnic minorities of the country but the Pashtun majority community. Second, al-Qaeda presence in Afghanistan is limited and poses no threat to Afghan insurgent leadership. Third, three decades of war has made Afghanistan, its society and tribal structure much weaker and immensely corrupt. Consequently, there is almost no possibility of finding viable Afghan elders who can influence their followers to switch sides.⁽⁸⁹⁾ Fourth, the support initially accorded to America's chosen man Karzai has declined within US and the West, leading to an 'unsustainable' current setup. Fifth, the allied states refused to comply with continuous American persuasion to keep providing their troops for US strategic war. Sixth, the waning US and NATO military power in Afghanistan, and the troop withdrawal, set for 2014, created the need for negotiations from a relatively urgent and strengthened perspective. Seventh, domestic economic burden pressurized the US administration to restrict time and resources being spent on an open-ended war in Afghanistan.⁽⁹⁰⁾

And last, Washington has realized that the Afghan insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan would not be destroyed anytime soon. Hence, the regional scenario forced a change in the American perspective, leading to US giving consent to Karzai regarding talks with the insurgent leadership. Washington's acceptance of such negotiations was tinged with apprehension, though.⁽⁹¹⁾

Despite the projected 2014 'drawdown' of most of its troops, the US is not about to exit the strategically vital Afghanistan connected with the resource-rich region of Central Asia. It may be recalled that the US under Obama has changed the withdrawal

timeline thrice, from 2011 to 2014 and now supposedly to 2024, once the BSA has been signed between the two governments. In any of the presidential speeches and in the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) signed between Kabul and Washington there is no mention of a complete withdrawal. President Obama has specifically called for a shift from combat to support mission after 2014. Although the expression ‘support mission’ sounds reassuringly hopeful, yet a closer look at US policy mission in post-2014 Afghanistan hints at America’s inclination towards direct counterinsurgency tasks over logistical and training support. The precedent of American non-combat troops getting engaged in targeted counter operations is another reason for the delay in signing the BSA.⁽⁹²⁾

Withdrawal timeframe

A precondition to peace talks from Taliban’s side is the exit of American and other foreign forces from Afghanistan. But the US did the exact opposite, with Afghan Government’s approval, by engaging in aggressive fighting. The high expectations and tight timeframe has given rise to various genuine concerns for the Americans. They are specifically alarmed about the influence that regional powers stand to exercise in post-2014 scenario. Almost all regional countries, including China lately, are keen to play a role in the post-2014 Afghanistan. So with a gradual decline in its leverage, the US finds it difficult to maintain its hard stance in terms of its prerequisites when talking to the Taliban. With the remaining influence, the US administration has been trying hard to reach a settlement with the Taliban, else further delay makes it impossible to pressurize Taliban to break ties with al-Qaeda.

Carrots and sticks approach

In the past few years, the Haqqani network has emerged as a high-profile American enemy and a strategic threat to its interests in the region. In September 2012, the Obama Government termed the Haqqani network a foreign terrorist organization and listed its suicide operations chief Qari Zakir as a “specially designated global terrorist.” Following US actions, the UN Security Council’s Taliban Sanctions Committee also placed the network on its blacklist.⁽⁹³⁾

The US administration believes that Pakistani intelligence has been supporting the network. As Jeffrey Dressler reported, Pakistan has facilitated the network not just with sanctuaries, but also with strategic and operational guidance.⁽⁹⁴⁾ The accusations have always been strongly denied by Pakistan, though. The Haqqani network is not considered a purely Afghan network by the US. American officials believe that Pakistani Taliban operate in and around Afghanistan. From day one, Islamabad has been under US pressure to take action against the Haqqani network and the Quetta Shura. Pakistan has so far managed to resist this demand.⁽⁹⁵⁾

When the stick approach failed, Washington finally offered carrots to provide momentum for peace talks. It was not just Karzai pressing for talks with top Taliban leadership, even the Haqqani group commander said that the Americans would not find a possible solution to the Afghan conflict if they approached only individuals or fighting groups, without engaging in talks with Mullah Omar and Taliban Shura.⁽⁹⁶⁾ Pakistan, from the start, has been asking the US to opt for peace talks, rather than engaging in a military strategy. Former secretary of state Hillary Clinton publicly acknowledged that with Pakistan's assistance the US Government took a chance and reached out to the Haqqani militants, simply to check whether they showed any interest in holding talks with them. But, both Pakistan and US remain at odds with each other over the order of peace talks with the Taliban and their allies.⁽⁹⁷⁾

US-Taliban: Series of talks

In 2005, the US military launched a Taliban reconciliation specific effort called 'Allegiance Program'. The command began with Afghan Government's approval, with the release of 80 former Taliban detainees each month from US detention facilities. But it was marred by absence of monitoring and follow-up.⁽⁹⁸⁾ A change in the US approach began to emerge in March 2009, with the Obama Administration showing willingness to reach out to moderate elements within the Afghan Taliban. The US bypassed the Karzai administration and began having secret meetings with the Taliban. In November 2010, direct contact between US officials and the Taliban began with German officials and Qatari royals facilitating as negotiators between the two in Munich, Germany.⁽⁹⁹⁾

In February 2011, preliminary talks between the Taliban and the US were held in Doha, Qatar, (as mentioned above). Talks were held with the Taliban Political Commission, a newly formed group fully authorized by Taliban leader Mullah Omar.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ It was more of an agenda-based discussion where Taliban presented a two-step approach. Their first demand to US was the release of five operatives detained in Guantanamo Bay, including three senior commanders, and in return they offered to release an American soldier, Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, held prisoner since 2009. Once prisoner exchange demand was agreed, the second step of confidence-building measures were to be considered. In this second step Taliban were seeking to engage in talks with the US to sort out issues like withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan to stop continuation of war. Interestingly, Taliban were willing to tolerate presence of American trainers and advisers for Afghan troops. Once concerns with US were settled, they wanted all-inclusive talks with Afghan groups, exclusive of HPC representatives handpicked by Karzai.⁽¹⁰¹⁾

In May 2011 preliminary talks between the Taliban and the US were held in Germany. The reconciliation process and talks with the Taliban had just started after a long bumpy road, that began nearly two years ago, but was later scuttled by Karzai. Substantial changes began to emerge, although at a gradual and slow pace, when Qatar, a close US ally, offered itself as interlocutor to initiate proper preliminary talks between the US and Taliban. US Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Marc Grossman, met with Afghan Taliban representatives in Qatar in January 2012 where they explored the possibilities of opening a dialogue with the Taliban. The latter were represented by a high-ranking delegation comprising Tayyab Agha, a former secretary to Mullah Omar, former Taliban foreign minister Shir Muhammad Abbas Stanekzai and former Taliban ambassador to Saudi Arabia Shabuddin Delawar. The two sides agreed that the Taliban open a formal office in Doha.⁽¹⁰²⁾

In March 2012 preliminary talks between the US and Taliban were terminated over the issue of prisoner release. Taliban accused the US of backtracking on their pledge of releasing Taliban commanders from Guantanamo as part of confidence-building package. The talks were abandoned over the order or sequence of steps to be taken, as

Taliban expected prisoner exchange before talks. After a deadlock of about 18 months, Taliban agreed to restart the talks with US, though this was achieved through Pakistan's efforts with the Taliban.⁽¹⁰³⁾

No sooner than the Taliban opened their office in Doha, which was praised by President Obama as an 'important first step' towards reconciliation, President Karzai protested and boycotted the Qatar process and suspended the security agreement. This time Karzai's outrage was over Taliban's using the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" emblem and flag at the office, which presented them as a legitimate Afghan government-in-exile. Although within days the emblem was removed, yet it had become a source of contention, leading to the eventual closing of the office and delaying of the first ever US-Taliban formal peace talks.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾

Still, the shaky event remains highly significant in which Pakistan played a vital role behind the scenes. The Doha office was a representation of first signs of willingness on part of US and Taliban, who got an international recognition as a legitimate negotiating partner — a status they were actually striving for. In order for peace talks to materialize, Obama in 2011 had expressed flexibility by inviting Taliban and the Haqqani network for formal talks in Qatar. US offered key concessions as an invitation to talks by dropping its three pre-conditions for talks, which were an immediate break with al-Qaeda, renunciation of violence, and acceptance of Afghan Constitution. But as expected, Taliban refused to stop using Afghan soil to threaten other countries and supporting the Afghan peace process.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾

Pakistan

"I have absolutely no doubt that there will be complete chaos in Afghanistan if a settlement is not reached by 2014. Afghanistan will erupt. And when that happens, Pakistan will have to pay."

Pakistan Foreign Ministry official, 26 March 2013⁽¹⁰⁶⁾

Pakistan's challenges & interests

Homegrown insurgency

Pakistan's national interests require a stable Afghanistan. Afghanistan's destabilization will have seriously damaging consequences in Pakistan, as it will bring a spillover of insurgency and an influx of refugee in the country. The real challenge confronted by Pakistan for the last decade is from the western border. The insurgency in Afghanistan has become an existential threat to Pakistan. Pakistan has suffered more casualties in the last decade from the Afghan conflict than it had suffered in the three wars with India. Pakistan is already fighting its own war with Taliban insurgents. Its military forces have been battling homegrown insurgency being waged under the banner of the TTP. The TTP attempted to replicate Afghan Taliban on the Pakistani soil. It has formed alliances with the Afghan Taliban and other extremist groups in the country. Both give each other support and sanctuaries across the borders in areas under their control.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾

Pakistani Taliban aim to destabilise Pakistan, for which they have frequently carried out suicide bombings in various parts of the country.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ The civilian and military leadership in Pakistan are united on countering the threats. The State aims at separating the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban. Pakistan is willing to exercise whatever residual influence it can over the top leadership of Afghan Taliban so that they are accommodated in the Afghan system, as also desired by the Karzai Government, although not in a dominant position otherwise they will strongly support the insurgents in Pakistan. Once the two Talibans are split, Pakistan can take effective counterinsurgency measures against the local Taliban.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

Therefore, Pakistan's commitment to ending insurgent threat to its already vulnerable security situation has been a top priority. In the context of this challenge, Pakistan is obligated to play a positive role in Afghanistan. Both nations have a common enemy to tackle, and it can only be done if there is mutual understanding and coordination.

A triangular nexus

India's presence and role in Afghanistan has raised suspicions in Islamabad, creating yet another challenge in an already complex situation. In the past decade, a triangular nexus of US-Afghanistan-India had been established that threatens Pakistan. Pakistan's foreign policy has always been India-centric and revolves around India-Pakistan security paradigm. Afghanistan was also viewed from an India-centric perspective. With the war against terrorism raging Pakistan had initially relaxed its concentration towards its eastern border. However, with Karzai calling Pakistan "a twin brother and India a great friend,"⁽¹¹⁰⁾ following it up with an invitation to India to extend its influence in his country, Pakistan got wary of Indian intentions. While Pakistan was already struggling with insecurity over India's influence in Afghanistan, the US formed a nexus with India, to encourage wider Indian role in Afghanistan.

Previously US had discouraged Indian military involvement in Afghanistan due to Pakistan's fears of being encircled by India. New Delhi also moved cautiously in Afghanistan keeping economic and infrastructure development in the limelight. But once the Indo-US relations took a turn for the better, US encouraged an enhanced Indian role there. Both US and India acknowledge Pakistan's role to make Afghan peace viable, for which Pakistan's legitimate security interests need to be accommodated. But the trilateral diplomatic context of Kabul-New Delhi-Washington is inclined towards encouraging Indian role in Afghanistan.⁽¹¹¹⁾

Besides American encouragement, Indian ambitions of power projection in South Asia and beyond raises questions within Pakistan. By playing a critical role in the security and economic development of Afghanistan, New Delhi hopes to be able to shape regional and global developments. Former Indian foreign secretary Nirupama Rao asserted that for India to emerge as a world power "a peaceful and stable neighbourhood and external environment" is required, that suggests that India looks for stability in Afghanistan as a key requisite to achieve its fundamental strategic goals. Therefore lately, India's assertive approach towards additional security policy deployment and military cooperation in Afghanistan has become significant.⁽¹¹²⁾

Following the Indo-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement signed in 2011, India provided light weapons and counterinsurgency (Coin) training to Afghan security forces. The bilateral security partnership with Indian troops presence in Afghanistan has not been taken lightly in Pakistan. Karzai has also responded positively to Indian interest in the country, knowing that it would further deepen mistrust between the two countries.⁽¹¹³⁾

On top of this, Karzai's 14 official visits to India are seen as a clear sign of his tilt towards India, especially during his last visit the wish list he presented appeared to be a clear invitation for India to exercise all of its strategic options including boosting of Afghanistan's security apparatus.⁽¹¹⁴⁾ In case India expands its role in Afghanistan in terms of security after the drawdown of international forces, it will set off alarm bells in already suspicious Pakistan. Moreover, discussions about Indian foreign policy under Narendra Modi as prime minister show the extent of Pakistan's concerns. India under Manmohan Singh had been aware of the Pakistani sensitivities towards Indian military role in Afghanistan and remained reluctant to follow Kabul's wish list, but this might not be the case under Modi. Modi had been critical of Singh for being too soft on Pakistan.⁽¹¹⁵⁾ Hence, Pakistan's concerns regarding Indian threat coming from Afghan soil cannot be ignored.

Karzai's diplomatic swing

After Karzai administration's realization of Pakistan's role in the peace process and subsequent shift in policy, Pakistan committed to assist the Afghan Government. Since Afghanistan came under the US patronage in the post-Taliban period, Pakistan was initially cornered and isolated by both the Bush administration and Karzai, until Karzai himself came under US criticism. Therefore, President Karzai, after getting re-elected in 2009, widened the circle of peace process with inclusion of Pakistan and regionalizing of the Afghan peace process.

The Afghan Government reached out to other neighbouring countries through a roadmap devised by Karzai or rather the High Peace Council in 2012. The document envisioned that the Taliban and other armed groups would have given up arms by 2015

and would be incorporated into Afghan politics and society. The idea behind the peace roadmap was to make the political system inclusive, democratic and equitable with all political parties and actors co-existing to pursue their political goals constitutionally. The document guides a five-step process to achieve peace with regional cooperation.⁽¹¹⁶⁾

Following the roadmap, securing Pakistan's support in strengthening the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process was crucial, for which the Council outlined a set of prerequisites to test Pakistan's commitment to peace, including;

- a) Release of Taliban detainees from Pakistani prisons or any other third country with Pakistan's assistance for confidence-building measures between the two countries
- b) Pakistan using of its influence to encourage Taliban to break ties with al-Qaeda
- c) Facilitation of direct contacts between the HPC/Afghanistan Government and leaders of Taliban and other armed opposition groups
- d) Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and US to explore and agree on terms for initiating direct peace talks between the HPC/Afghanistan Government and leaders of Taliban and other Afghan armed groups with Saudi Arabia as the venue.

Karzai attached a practical commitment condition for Pakistan to fulfil Afghan demands. Afghanistan demanded and followed as being drafted the bilateral and trilateral meetings where countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, US (in Core Group format) and UK (FM trilateral format) were involved.⁽¹¹⁷⁾ Islamabad and Kabul established a Joint Afghan-Pakistan Peace Commission in March 2011, with its first official meeting held in Islamabad in June 2011 to promote confidence-building measures for furthering political discussions. Similarly, a Core Group of Pakistan, Afghanistan and US was created to assess progress and priority recommendations. The Istanbul Conference, Bonn II, Chicago Conference, and Tokyo Conference were important opportunities for the Afghan Government to reflect upon its past policies and setbacks in the peace efforts.⁽¹¹⁸⁾

On closer look, it appears the roadmap was outlined by Karzai to attain a consistent and coherent channel to launch formal, direct negotiations with the mentioned parties.

Prisoner release pressures

President Karzai and Afghan Peace Council kept pressurizing the Pakistan Government to release the Afghan Taliban detained in Pakistani prisons. Afghan officials handed a list of prisoners to Pakistan. Karzai believed that their release would be an incentive for Taliban insurgents to participate in the peace process. Pakistan initially showed reluctance in releasing the prisoners, as there had been no guarantees and no mechanism to follow the releases through which their enrolment into the reconciliatory programme would be made possible. But, with increasing pressure from the Afghan side, Pakistan was left with no choice but to comply with the demand. As expected, most of the freed Afghan Taliban rejoined the insurgency instead of joining the peace process. The blame for this once again fell upon Pakistan, and Karzai opined that Pakistan had mishandled the matter. Karzai asked Pakistan to set up a mechanism to track freed prisoners all of whom were Afghan nationals. Pakistan established the system.⁽¹¹⁹⁾

Getting nowhere with the peace plan, Karzai began to pressurize Pakistan for the release of No. 2 Taliban commander, Mullah Ghani Baradar. Pakistan released Baradar, but due to inefficiency in the past, Islamabad only allowed Afghan delegates to hold meeting with him regarding the talks where he delivered Shura's message to the Council.⁽¹²⁰⁾ However, Karzai Government's accusations of Pakistan's lack of sincerity for peace, annoyed Pakistan as it had released the prisoners and facilitated the talks, but no effort had been made by the Karzai administration to bring insurgents to the table for talks.⁽¹²¹⁾ Karzai's plan of wooing the Taliban by releasing them from prison thus failed.

Effective diplomacy

In the context of Afghan Government's demands or expectations from Pakistan, Pakistan used diplomatic channels with both the US and Taliban, to soften their rigid positions towards each other. The opening of Taliban's Doha office and US-Taliban direct talks that captured lot of media hype, was indeed an outcome of months long secret

negotiations by Pakistan. There had been behind-the-scenes direct talks between the Obama Administration and Pakistani policymakers with US Secretary of State John Kerry and Pakistan's then chief of army staff General Kayani.⁽¹²²⁾

The talks between the two parties revolved around grappling with Taliban's top leadership Mullah Omar and the Haqqani network. The US realizing the vitality of the Haqqani network, started considering the possibility of talks with them. From here, Pakistan began persuading Washington to change its rigid stance towards Taliban. The US had been insisting on certain preconditions as mentioned earlier. Pakistan persuaded the US to initiate the reconciliatory phase, before moving on to the preconditions.⁽¹²³⁾

On the other hand Pakistan also engaged the Taliban to convince them to be flexible in their stance. Taliban were persuaded to understand that by participating in the peace dialogue process, they can gain international acceptance, and their primary demand of international forces exiting Afghanistan could be met. They were also made to understand that continuance of the armed conflict would prolong the stay of the foreign forces. Hence, despite Washington's doubts, the Taliban agreed to come to the negotiating table. The circumstances on both sides prior to talks were such that Taliban hardliners, especially those from the operational ranks, were not ready to give any space to the US. While the US was so exhausted with its stand-alone efforts, that it could have settled for a Taliban powersharing model in Afghanistan.⁽¹²⁴⁾

Beside the US-Taliban engagement, Pakistan also facilitated an effective dialogue process between Afghan Taliban and the non-Pashtun opposition group, the Northern Alliance of Afghanistan. The senior leadership of both the groups agreed to work together in stabilizing the country. This effort helped make the Afghan peace process inclusive and helped in curtailing disruptive trends among groups.⁽¹²⁵⁾

Af-Pak liaison: A pendulum of need and disbelief

The peace roadmap seems to be drafted by Afghan policymakers, to secure Pakistan's assistance in resolving Afghan problems. Karzai turned to Pakistan for to attaining peace by skilfully manipulating Pakistan.

Even Pakistan's help in bringing the negotiating parties together was not received positively. Karzai has expressed his anger over direct contacts between US and Taliban and stalled the development from going further by creating a negative impression of Pakistan. However, what Karzai constantly overlooked was the Taliban reluctance to accept him as a legitimate actor. Pakistan had tried to facilitate dialogue process between the Afghan Government and Taliban. In January 2014, Pakistan along with US asked the Afghan Taliban to start peace talks with the Karzai Government but the Taliban make their own decisions.⁽¹²⁶⁾ This resistance from Taliban has compelled US and Pakistan to stop counting on Karzai to initiate dialogue, even with the exit deadline approaching. Lately the HPC members have also distanced themselves from Karzai, after the meeting between Taliban and non-Pashtuns.⁽¹²⁷⁾

An overview of key interests

Key interests of Pakistan in Afghanistan can be briefly outlined as follows;

- A stable and somewhat neutral government in Afghanistan
- Afghan Taliban becoming a part of Afghan political affairs through a power-sharing deal, but preferably not in a dominant position
- A gradual withdrawal of American and international/NATO forces from Afghanistan with a favourable security and financial arrangement in place
- A check on Indian role in Afghanistan, especially in the context of Pakistan's fear of Afghan soil being used to advance strategic designs against Pakistan
- Continuation of American economic and military support to Pakistan for counterinsurgency operations in the country

Peace initiatives to date with different facilitators

Saudi initiatives

Saudi relations with the Taliban deteriorated after Mullah Omar refused to comply with his pledge made with Riyadh on handing over Osama bin Laden to the

Saudi authorities. Finally, contacts were severed after the 9/11 attacks. Riyadh punished the Taliban by supporting the Karzai Government with reconstruction assistance and direct foreign aid but followed a low-profile approach in Afghanistan until the revival of some interest through two rounds of mediation.

The Karzai Government has twice requested the Saudi Government to mediate with the insurgents. The first time to help counter intensified insurgency since 2006 and the second time after the US announced its troops withdrawal date. In September 2008 and February 2009, the Saudi Government arranged first high-level direct contacts between the Karzai Government, Taliban and Hizb-e-Islami (Gulbuddin Hekmatyar — HIG). Prior to engaging with the Taliban for peace process, Saudi Arabia had asked them to break ties with al-Qaeda. The first round of talks couldn't yield any results because there was no official representation from HIG and Taliban leadership and participants were just former functionaries. The Afghan Government too was indirectly represented through Karzai's elder brother Qayyum Karzai.⁽¹²⁸⁾

The second round, chaired by Saudi Intelligence head, Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz, had high-ranking participation. It included Mullah Ahmad Wakil Mutawakil, former foreign minister in the Taliban government; former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan Mullah Abdus Salam Zaef; Ghairat Bahir, son-in-law of Hekmatyar; Mullah Agha Jan Mutassim, son-in-law of Mullah Omar and former chair of the political committee of the Taliban leadership council from Taliban side. British diplomats were also engaged in this round. During both rounds the Saudi Government offered Mullah Omar and Hekmatyar permanent or temporary sanctuary in Saudi Arabia in case a political resolution of the conflict along with the power-sharing possibility with the Taliban in Afghanistan was achieved.⁽¹²⁹⁾ However, it was made clear by the Saudis that the Taliban needed to openly distance itself from al-Qaeda, a precondition for any future engagement in peace talks.⁽¹³⁰⁾

The Saudi initiatives were appreciated by the international community but were not well received by the Iranian Government who view Saudi role in Afghanistan with Taliban as contentious. The Shia population in Afghanistan and certain Northern Alliance

leaders also rejected the meetings.⁽¹³¹⁾ The non-Pashtun and Shia groups of Northern Alliance are always suspicious of Saudi involvement and some even reject its involvement in the political settlement of the conflict. Saudi Arabia is seen as an interfering actor rather than a mediator. Even senior leadership of Taliban does not wish Saudis to act as brokers, as they accuse Riyadh of betraying them by aligning with the West. This suggests that Saudi role as a peace broker or facilitator might not bring about much success.

Objectives

Saudi Arabia's objectives in post-2014 Afghanistan are:

- To establish a unified national government in Kabul so that another civil war can be avoided, even if some elements of Taliban need to be accommodated,
- To keep Iranian influence out of Kabul,
- To isolate al-Qaeda, which is regarded as an arch enemy of the Kingdom,
- Stability of Pakistan⁽¹³²⁾

Saudi Arabia's policy in post-2014 scenario

So far the Saudis have kept a very discreet status in Afghanistan, despite their generous backing to Karzai. The Saudi regime expects to continue keeping a low profile, even in case of a Taliban comeback. They would not prefer to play a leading role in the country. But even from the sidelines they would support Pakistan and certain Taliban elements. Saudi interests lie in splitting of Taliban from al-Qaeda and a stable government in Kabul. More importantly, containing Iranian influence is currently more vital for the Saudi Kingdom than fighting al-Qaeda.

Saudi Arabia though remains an important party to political solution, yet its former and present involvement in Afghanistan limits its role. It would most probably support a settlement behind the scenes, rather than getting openly involved in mediations. Riyadh also has no time pressures and little to risk. Despite Karzai's repeated suggestions of opening a Taliban office in Saudi Arabia, there has been no encouragement by the

Saudi Kingdom, at least not openly. A more active role could be assumed by Qatar, which is viewed as a neutral party with no historical baggage of active involvement in Afghanistan. Qatar has already proved to be a more acceptable mediator and facilitator to the negotiating parties.⁽¹³³⁾

Turkey's mediation

Mediation has become an imperative constituent of Turkish foreign policy. The policymakers in Turkey are ambitiously pursuing mediation between the conflicting parties throughout the world and contributing in building understanding through effective mediation as a means of peace making. One such mediating example is Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁽¹³⁴⁾

While Turkey is not geographically connected to either Afghanistan or Pakistan, it is trusted in both the countries. Other than historical, religious and cultural linkages, it shares close bilateral relations with both. Despite being a member of NATO, Turkey restrained from participating in combat operations and chose to remain involved in ensuring security, provided logistical assistance to other foreign forces and trained Afghan security personnel. The noncombat role of Turkey made inroads into the hearts and minds of Afghans. Turkey views its presence in Afghanistan not only in terms of NATO-led security mission but also as a 'brotherhood duty' to assist Afghanistan in restoring peace.⁽¹³⁵⁾

Diplomatic initiatives: Afghanistan-Turkey-Pakistan

Turkey's approach to peace in Afghanistan relied on proposals like reconciliation and restructuring in Afghan society, bridging the gap between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and enhancing regional cooperation between Afghanistan and countries in its neighbourhood. In pursuit of supporting a regional framework, the first step Turkey undertook was to try building trust between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The series of trilateral dialogues between the three countries began to create a political platform for resolving bilateral conflicts between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The first trilateral summit was held in 2007, followed by six more in 2008, 2009, and twice in 2010, 2011, and 2012, at the presidential level.⁽¹³⁶⁾ The summits concentrated on three areas: high-level political dialogue, security cooperation and development partnership.⁽¹³⁷⁾

Another significant event was the “Istanbul for Afghanistan” Summit, also known as Istanbul Summit for Friendship and Cooperation in the Heart of Asia. This initiative was launched in November 2011 and brought together all the bordering countries of Afghanistan, with the aim of finding sustainable solutions for Afghanistan’s security and stability. The presidential dignitaries of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey and Iran, special representative of the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan met in Istanbul for the summit, while representatives of the US, UK, Kyrgyzstan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Russia, France, Italy, Germany, Japan, the UN, EU, and NATO attended as observers.⁽¹³⁸⁾

The much appreciated Istanbul Process was significant as it took place shortly after the assassination of HPC head Burhanuddin Rabbani. Turkey established a cooperative mechanism for investigating Rabbani’s death, a step welcomed by both Pakistan and Afghanistan along with the wider international community.⁽¹³⁹⁾

In December 2011, while visiting Turkey, President Karzai expressed his preference for Turkey to host a liaison office for the Afghan Taliban to facilitate reconciliation. Although Qatar had been chosen as the location for Taliban’s office, the possibility of Turkey playing the mediating role between the Taliban and Afghan Government was not ignored.⁽¹⁴⁰⁾ Turkey is one country that has maintained very good relations with all the potential parties of Afghan peace process. Interestingly, Turkey has good relations with the Kabul Government, Northern Alliance and even the Taliban when they were in power.

Interests/objectives

Turkey’s approach towards Afghanistan is also based on its own strategic interests that cannot be secured as long as Afghanistan and the region is unstable. Turkey’s key interests can be outlined as,

1. Fighting terrorism in Afghanistan to bring stability to the region
2. Achieve economic gains through expanding trade and commerce ⁽¹⁴¹⁾

Turkey in post-2014 Afghanistan

The question of prolonged Turkish presence in Afghanistan after withdrawal date is yet to be tackled. As it stands, Turkey has not made any long-term commitments in a noncombat role in Afghanistan. The decision of pursuing mediation and committing to security cooperation depends on US commitment in Afghanistan beyond 2014. Despite these uncertainties, plus the closure of the Doha office, there might be a chance of a Taliban office opening in Turkey, as it is seen as neutral by the conflicting and negotiating parties in Afghanistan.

Maldives talks

The representatives of Afghan Government, the non-militant opposition, the Taliban and the HIG also unofficially engaged three times in Maldives. The meetings were held in January, May and November of 2010. The initiative was proposed by Homayoun Jarir, Hekmatyar's son-in-law and his son Feroz represented Hekmatyar as a personal envoy. President Karzai, despite an initial rejection of the initiative, sent personal advisers and observers to all the three rounds of talks. The Taliban were represented through associated parliamentarians and provincial governors. It was reported that a representative of the Haqqani network also attended the third meeting. The talks, privately funded by Afghan business community, were of little significance, but they were seen as a contribution to confidence-building and establishing contacts. The meetings concluded with a declaration to establish a "High National Security Council" which would serve until a ceasefire is reached. The Council would confirm government decisions by two-third majority prior to implementation. It asked the foreign forces to withdraw and end all external intrusion in the peace process as a precondition to the ceasefire. The results of the meetings were to be discussed with the Pakistani and Iranian representatives.⁽¹⁴²⁾

Qatar — Taliban's choice

Prior to all the talk initiatives undertaken by the Afghan Government, High Peace Council, and the regional and international parties, the Qatar process was seen as a comparative success. It was for the first time that both the US and Taliban held substantial talks and exchanged their perspectives.

Doha office

After more than a decade of bloodshed in Afghanistan, long-awaited peace talks were held in Doha, Qatar. But how Qatar came to be the choice for talks by Taliban even though it never recognized the Taliban regime in Afghanistan is an interesting subject. Doha, not a big city, usually hosts about 6,000 Afghan labourers and businessmen. When the Taliban regime was toppled by the US, Taliban leaders looked for refuge in Qatar which was denied as their names came under the sanctions lists of the US and UN. However, some low-ranking Taliban managed to get labour or business visa to travel to Qatar. This led to a gradual increase in numbers and activities of Afghan Taliban figures in Qatar.⁽¹⁴³⁾

Taliban representatives arrived secretly in Qatar to hold talks with Western officials, especially with the US which was eager to reach a deal with Taliban in order to secure an honourable exit from Afghanistan. As a confidence-building measure when the Afghan Government and US offered protection to those ready to participate in peace talks these Taliban figures took the chance. Therefore, over the past few years, Taliban representatives from Qatar have begun to hold conferences on Afghanistan in Japan, France, Germany, Iran, to name a few. They represented only Afghan Taliban, the insurgent group led by Mullah Omar.⁽¹⁴⁴⁾

With this background, Qatar was an obvious Taliban choice. Establishing the Doha office was a result of secret talks held between Taliban and US representatives and facilitated by Germany in 2010. During the first contacts between Germany and Taliban, Taliban asked for Qatar to be pulled into talks as they trusted Qatar. Taliban's choice of including Qatar in the talks was a well-thought out decision that fitted their strategy. The reason behind Taliban's choosing of Qatar as a venue was explained on their official website in 2012. First, it's an Islamic country with no border with Afghanistan. This was to ensure that Karzai doesn't use this as a pretext to accuse that Taliban were directed by a neighbouring state like in case of Pakistan. Second, it is a country with no military presence in Afghanistan, unlike Turkey, that has a military presence as a member of NATO. Third, it carries no historical baggage of interference in Afghan affairs and is seen as a neutral state. If an office was to open in Saudi Arabia, its close ties with

Pakistan and support would have raised doubts among Afghan officials. So to create a balance on all sides, the Taliban had selected Qatar.⁽¹⁴⁵⁾

The US was happy with the choice, but Karzai was not. Karzai had wanted the talks to be based in Turkey or Saudi Arabia as they were seen influential and have closer ties with the Afghan Government. Karzai was eventually convinced to give his approval for the office in Qatar, but only on the condition that it would be used only for peace talks with Afghan officials and not for activities like the expansion of Taliban ties with the rest of the world, nor for recruitment and fundraising.⁽¹⁴⁶⁾

Interests

All the parties involved in supporting or hoping to get something from the talks in Qatar had individual interests as outlined below,

- **US:** release of its soldier, Sgt. Bergdahl; and a safe exit as part of some sort of deal with the Taliban
- **Taliban:** release of their members from the US prison, reducing their dependence on Pakistan; and international recognition
- **Afghan Government:** to create distance between the Taliban and Pakistan, and Taliban members to participate in talks with Afghan Peace Council
- **Pakistani Government:** to show that it does not control the Taliban and that they are based in Qatar rather than Pakistan
- **Qatar Government:** for its part, insists on helping, seeking to project itself as the main mediator in a prolonged conflict⁽¹⁴⁷⁾

Talks

The US and Taliban initiated the talks by placing a set of demands and expectations from each other. Taliban wanted the release of five Taliban heads held by US at Guantanamo Bay in exchange for US Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl held by Taliban since 2009. However, even before talks began they collapsed, first in 2012 when pledges made by both sides couldn't work out. Taliban suspended talks, blaming the US of changing policies when it refused to release prisoners. But it doesn't mean that Taliban were not

interested in holding talks again. As far as talks with the US, Taliban's commitment had credibility because sending a Taliban delegation for talks led by Tayyab Agha to Qatar meant Mullah Omar and Taliban Shura were personally involved.⁽¹⁴⁸⁾

In 2013, the US and Taliban met again. Both sides were more cautious and made efforts to understand each other's position. This time, the talks were suspended by the Karzai Government, on the issue of Taliban's using 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' flag and emblem symbol. Karzai immediately demanded the closure of the office and postponed Peace Council members' visit to meet Taliban. Karzai accused the US of conspiring to divide Afghanistan by undermining his authority and projecting the Taliban as an alternative Afghan government. Karzai insisted that the office should only be used for peace talks with Afghan Peace Council to establish contacts, and later the venue should be moved to Afghanistan. On American demand the Taliban removed the flag, but the Doha office remained closed. No prospects of any new rounds of talks are evident. The matter of holding talks has now become an issue of honour.⁽¹⁴⁹⁾ This is frustrating for the international community as the next talks would not be a resumption of the process where it was left but a new process altogether.

Peace process at present

At present peace in Afghanistan remains a dream to be realised. The need to have a consensus peace deal is imperative, to avoid a return to the civil war. In the context of Afghanistan-Taliban talks, President Karzai has invited the Taliban to the negotiating table and asked them to stop using foreign guns against their own people. He expressed his government's willingness to have contact with Taliban through a political office in Turkey or Saudi Arabia, to kick-start negotiations, but with no compromise on the Constitution of the country and public interest.⁽¹⁵⁰⁾ Hence several months after dismissing the Doha process of 2013, Taliban expressed willingness to have indirect mediation, brokered by intermediaries shuttling the between the parties, modelled on the 1989 process of Soviet troops withdrawal. With December 2014 approaching, the Taliban are also prepared for a scenario where no settlement is reached in Afghanistan. But the prospects of talks still haven't been dismissed. The Afghan Taliban leadership is still

willing to talk, but the new generation of battlefield commanders opposes the measures and they are getting ready to capture power by shifting the military balance.⁽¹⁵¹⁾

In January 2014, through reviving secrets contacts, a delegation from Afghanistan's HPC headed by Council head Masoom Stanekzai met in Dubai, UAE, with 16 high ranking Taliban figures led by Agha Jan Mutassim, ex-Taliban finance minister, to lay grounds for peace talks.⁽¹⁵²⁾ Although where these talks would lead the peace process is yet to be seen.

The Afghan Government submitted a plan to the Pakistani Government, asking for "supporting peace negotiations process, paving the road for talks between the High Peace Council (HPC) and the Taliban, releasing of key Taliban commanders and ensuring the participation of Pakistani religious scholars in the grand meeting of Islamic scholars from the Muslim world". At present, the Afghan Government is taking the peace matter cautiously, not even talking of its pre-conditions with Afghan Taliban. The reason behind this is to promote an inter-Afghan dialogue and with Pakistan's help it wants to make it an Afghan-led process.⁽¹⁵³⁾

Pakistan, on its part, released a dozen more Taliban prisoners. The release so far hasn't led to any concessions from Taliban.⁽¹⁵⁴⁾ Karzai's visit to Pakistan did not curb apprehensions in Pakistan because as Rahimullah Yousufzai said, no one in Pakistan expects anything substantial from Karzai, as he keeps changing policy on daily basis.⁽¹⁵⁵⁾

Nevertheless, the Pakistani Government appreciated the Dubai talks even though it was an informal contact held between a few groups. It might set a precedent for other groups to join in. Prime Minister's Adviser on National Security and Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz hinted at the possibility of Taliban relocating their office in another country. The country will be chosen by the Afghan Government's approval, because for Pakistan, Afghan reconciliation process is more important than the location. Pakistan's commitment is to facilitate the process whether talks are held in Dubai or Istanbul. Although time is running out, and the peace process has to resume sooner than later.⁽¹⁵⁶⁾

All the actors in Afghanistan whether the government, the Taliban, opposition groups, US and Pakistan, appear to be jumbled up with policy options and not clear about

the right direction. Karzai wants to have peace, but on his own conditions. He also worries that US might cut a quick deal with Taliban. Pakistan is worried that Karzai's stubbornness is prolonging the peace process and his indecision about the security pact with US might further destabilise the region. For this reason, Pakistan has currently been trying to engage with the Afghan Taliban and the US while maintaining contacts with Karzai. Pakistan holds that "there is no other option but reconciliation, with or without Karzai. If he continues to be this stubborn, he and his High Peace Council will naturally be sidelined."⁽¹⁵⁷⁾

In this situation, one cannot say for sure how long Afghanistan's harmonious mode with Pakistan will last. After a long troubled relationship full of ups and downs, another rift between the two countries will not be surprising. Just a few months back, Afghan officials had thrown various accusations at Pakistan, from aligning with the US, to promoting a power-sharing plan favourable for Taliban, to controlling the Taliban war in Afghanistan. As recently as March 2013, Karzai's spokesman said that "if we signed a strategic agreement with Pakistan, the Afghan public would stone us to death because they know that the suicide bombers that kill civilians and our armed forces come across from Pakistan."⁽¹⁵⁸⁾

In terms of US-Taliban engagement, there seems to be no contacts between the two after the collapse of the Doha process in 2013. The US has exhausted its resources and forces along with those of its allies in Afghanistan. White House had worked out three possible solutions for resolving the insurgency problem. First, the Alpha solution was to exhaust insurgent Taliban's capacity permanently. This didn't work. The second, the Bravo solution, was to fight back hard through troop surge policy and force them to accept the Afghan Constitution and Government. This also did not work. The third, the Charlie solution, has been a 'no other choice' kind of a compromise, basically for the US to follow. At this stage the US had to accept Taliban as a legitimate entity in Afghanistan that was to be accommodated by accepting their demands and holding talks with them. Hence, it is the third solution that the US has been working on.⁽¹⁵⁹⁾

At this time Americans are disappointed with Karzai. After a lot of persuasion and Karzai's reluctance to sign the security agreement about post-2014 Afghanistan's

security, Karzai has become irrelevant to the United States. Subsequently, Karzai's decision has caused frustration at the White House and Pentagon. Washington has adopted a position of its own, to engage with the new Afghan president after April elections this year. A senior US official remarked: "If he's (Karzai) not going to be part of the solution, we have to have a way to get past him." It's a pragmatic recognition that clearly Karzai may not sign (the deal) and that he doesn't represent the voice of the Afghan people.⁽¹⁶⁰⁾

But outfoxing Karzai does not resolve US concerns. It has created further complications for Washington. Washington will have to wait for the elections, if the transfer of power occurs peacefully, it will be a very big development. But this might be too optimistic since the Taliban refuse to accept the Afghan Constitution and the electoral process. There are already too many questions regarding the elections, one of which is Karzai's willingness to let go of power as planned. Moreover, if the new successor takes power, deciding new terms for relations between US-Afghanistan would be too exhausting. This would mean the talks about peace and security deal might start some time in the second half of 2014. Nevertheless, whatever the situation is, if the new president agrees on signing the pact, the US will retain its presence and assist in peace talks, otherwise there is already talk of a complete withdrawal by the end of 2014.⁽¹⁶¹⁾

Conclusion

Afghanistan's struggle for peace seems to predate history. Despite the peace efforts, the year 2014 doesn't seem to offer much hope for the Afghan people. Reconciliation talks with the Afghan Taliban continue, but the question that remains is, whether these talks have the potential to bring all factions on the same page or would they remain merely symbolic. Each actor involved in the peace process holds diverging interests and has conflicting understanding of the peace strategy. The related countries are committed to play their roles, to assist the peace process; yet, their individual national interests often overlap and are prioritised. One thing that all actors involved in the peace process share, is the realization that the insurgency cannot be tackled and wiped off militarily. But Afghanistan is unlikely to have peace unless they all, including the Afghan Government, agree on one common interest.

The peace process has been held hostage to individual gains of the stakeholders. Karzai seems to be more concerned about the chief position he aspires to have and to own the process than the actual success of the process. Moreover, the policies Karzai wants to pursue place the onus on Pakistan's efforts, rather than on his own diplomatic skills. The truth is, Pakistan's previous policy of having 'strategic depth' to get an edge in Afghanistan over India is a lost cause.

No country other than Pakistan has more at stake, and Pakistan stands to be affected adversely from escalation in militancy, refugee influx and other perils of rising insecurity in Afghanistan. Pakistan is perceived to have influence on the Afghan Taliban and this perception leads to official pressure on Pakistan from the Afghan side. However, the extent of Pakistan's influence on Afghan Taliban may be overly exaggerated. Even though Pakistan managed to persuade the US and convince the Taliban into softening their policies towards each other on the matter of peace initiative. It was Pakistan's diplomatic skill that worked, in addition to the fact that both the US and Taliban were already ready to hold talks with each other.

On the other side, in Pakistan there seems to be an understanding that the Afghan Taliban are fighting against foreign occupation. Other than this, in their actions they are independent of Pakistan's influence,⁽¹⁶²⁾ Pakistan may be in a position to exert some influence at times, but definitely cannot control them at all times. As their track record shows, the Taliban are not a group that easily accepts dictation from anyone. There also have been instances of the Afghan Taliban being caught and imprisoned in Pakistan, leading to a high level of mistrust.

So far, there haven't been any serious talks between Karzai and Taliban, despite claims made by the Karzai administration. The talks initiated by Karzai, have been low-level ones. Taliban still haven't accepted the legitimacy of the Karzai regime and have expressed no intention to do so. All channels utilized by Karzai, ranging from Afghan Peace Council to commanders from Taliban's tribe, from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia, have only exposed Karzai as a powerless figure.⁽¹⁶³⁾

The powersharing deal offered to Taliban by Karzai, even if acceptable to a certain degree for Washington and Islamabad, seems unmanageable. It is not in the nature of Taliban to share power and authority.⁽¹⁶⁴⁾ Although they might welcome a constitutionally cemented power arrangement, if it guarantees them a significant role in the Afghan administration.⁽¹⁶⁵⁾

Currently, the US seems to be pursuing a policy of urgent dignified exit. However, despite a decade-long presence in Afghanistan, the US has not been able to transform it from a failed state to a stable one. The best time for engaging the Taliban was not in the past few years after setting the withdrawal date, but from day one. The security agreement being pushed by the United States has so far been rejected by the Karzai administration. Perhaps one reason for his refusal is that the US at present doesn't consult or inform him of its moves in Afghanistan. Signing the pact would accord it freedom and legitimise the actions it takes on its own without taking the Afghan administration in confidence.⁽¹⁶⁶⁾ Beyond this, Americans don't have a grand strategy of turning Afghan fate, but they are simply poised to safeguard their past efforts and strategic interests.

There have been lot of apprehensions about Karzai and US over their way of dealing with the Afghan crisis and the peace prospects among Afghans. Even the Peace Council officials felt disappointed by Karzai's refusal to sign the security pact with the US, because when the new regime will eventually sign it, that will be quick and without a reasonable perspective of the overall ground realities for future security. However, most apprehensions are kept private. No one dares say in public that the Afghan Government might collapse. No one voices the fact that the rights of Afghan women might be sacrificed in any future settlement with the Taliban, in the name of bringing peace and stability to the country.

Accommodating the Taliban through a legitimate process is only possible through constitutional amendment, making the system less Kabul-centric. A multi-tiered process of an inclusive, comprehensive nature where all Afghan factions are represented in some key roles or positions is mainly looked upon. The role of regional and

international interested parties is made obligatory in brokering the deal but through working from outside, from Afghan government perspective. Pakistan's window of opportunity with the incoming Afghan regime should be to avoid falling back into India-centric policy and play a more constructive role through socio-economic cooperation for ensuring a peaceful, stable and prosperous Afghanistan.

The Afghan Government needs to prepare for both best- and worst-case scenarios post 2014, i.e. a peace settlement or at least some understanding regarding the peace agreement among the negotiating parties or no agreement at all. After transition, Afghanistan may either struggle with a weak political setup and a divided state or at worst could fall back into another episode of civil war. Due to some domestic and international interests, more than a decade of Western assistance has proved to be unsuccessful in producing a stable, strong and viable central government. In any situation, Afghanistan has to be prevented from falling into the hands of rogue, terrorist elements like al-Qaeda. Moving towards sustainable peace requires patience and a more comprehensive and inclusive approach. Consultations have to be held among all stakeholders, including the administration, civil society and key opponents. An effective consensus among the regional countries is essential when engaging with the Afghan government.

Hence, the importance of signing the security agreement with US, followed by with NATO, has repeatedly been highlighted by various domestic and international actors. Although the Afghan security forces over time have been growing in numbers and capabilities, yet they are committed to prove to their people to be a responsible force by gradually taking over and carrying out a series of security operations independently. The Afghan forces are even maintaining security in areas where they gained lead. Still it would be a mistake to underestimate the striking muscles of insurgent Taliban.⁽¹⁶⁷⁾ There are still too many challenges which they are not yet ready to tackle on their own without foreign support. The International Security Assistance force continues to help develop the capabilities of the Afghan security forces to enable them to fill the critical gaps that would remain even after the ISAF mission ends by the end of 2014. These key capability

developing areas include; air support; intelligence enterprise; special operations; and Afghan security ministry capacity.⁽¹⁶⁸⁾

Of all the above mentioned skills, one critical need is the continuous flow of international funding and coalition force assistance to sustain the Afghan forces beyond 2014. However, challenging uncertainties remain because of delay in finalizing any future security agreement with the international partners. Taliban have already capitalized on the absence of any such agreement and that makes Afghans apprehensive. Another critical necessity still lacking after so many years of coalition assistance is an effective and sustainable system for Afghan forces along with the lack of accountability mechanism and weak rule of law that hitches efforts of Afghan forces in building a secure environment.⁽¹⁶⁹⁾ The Afghan forces have proved they can fight, yet that is the result of twelve years of training and foreign assistance at the institutional level, from advise to training is still very much needed so that whatever capabilities they have accomplished becomes maintainable over time. Hence, the BSA remains crucial to the post-2014 scenario.⁽¹⁷⁰⁾

Hence, despite the measures taken to accelerate the peace process, the completion of the process is not possible in 2014. Three significant issues will dominate the year 2014, including, the presidential elections, Bilateral Security Agreement between the new Afghan government and the US, and the international forces' withdrawal. No matter what the circumstances hold for Afghanistan post-2014, one thing is clear, the Taliban do not enjoy popular support to the extent generally suspected. Furthermore, even if the current peace efforts fail to bring respite to the Afghan people, these efforts will be pursued resolutely, likely with international and regional support. Failure of the Afghan peace process has not been an option considered by any country involved, as peace is the only saviour.

Postscript — 15 May 2014 Update:

The enthusiastic way Afghan people participated in the 5 April Presidential election ⁽ⁱ⁾ (overall turnout 58 per cent, ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ women's turnout 35 per cent, ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾) was a show of defiance of the Taliban. They thronged polling stations despite threats to their lives. ^(iv) Another hopeful signal came in the fact that they transcended the ethnic divides by voting Dr. Abdullah Abdullah — a Tajik from maternal and Pashtun from paternal side and candidate of the National Coalition of Afghanistan, an entity that stands for the transformed (2011) Northern Alliance — into the lead. ^(v) No doubt the Afghans have surprised the whole world with their determination and maturity.

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