

Peace and Reconciliation in Afghanistan: The Way Forward

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Abstract

As the date for the complete withdrawal of the foreign combat mission approaches, Afghanistan is all set to witness the 'transition' (Inteqal) phase, wherein the local security apparatus will have shoulder the responsibility of maintaining security in the entire country, and at the same time, take forward the counterinsurgency exercise. While protagonists of the anticipated withdrawal of the foreign forces assert the preparedness of the Afghan National security Forces (ANSF), the continuing violence suggests otherwise. The withdrawal of the foreign troops will mean the absence of an efficient security cover within which the ANSF used to operate. Absent that, the local security apparatus will be handicapped in maintaining, let alone improving, the security scenario in Afghanistan. The security unpreparedness therefore necessitates the implementation of a broad-based reconciliation strategy that can act as the sole guarantor of peace and stability in Afghanistan. If the Kabul government or the US-led coalition fails to enter into negotiations with the Taliban, the insurgency is only going to take a vicious form once the foreign troops withdraw. In this backdrop, reconciliation with the insurgents remains the only viable policy option that can be instrumental in ensuring lasting peace in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Security Transition, Taliban, Peace and Reconciliation, HPC, Reintegration.

1. Introduction:

The withdrawal of the NATO-led foreign combat mission from Afghanistan shall in many ways mark an important and crucial phases in Afghanistan's modern history. The security transition and the effects emanating from the process will be decisive as far as Afghanistan's future is concerned. Not only shall the transition (*inteqal*) put to test the ability of the Afghan security forces in containing the insurgency; post-2014 scenario will be a litmus test for Afghanistan itself to sustain as a democratic state amidst a host of potential challenges. However, international assistance in the form of aid will continue to be a major determinant of Afghanistan's long-term socio-political and economic stability. The withdrawal of the foreign troops does not entail the abandoning of Afghanistan by the international community *per se*. Instead, the transition embodies an opportunity for Afghanistan to resurrect itself as a sovereign, democratic and pluralistic nation-state with a renewed importance – both at the regional and as well as at the international level. In this regard a lot will depend on the Afghans themselves to unite and take their country forward as far as the state and nation-building process is concerned.

The positive achievements made in the last twelve years notwithstanding, Afghanistan is still faced with a plethora of challenges which collectively render the state and nation-building process a difficult enterprise. These challenges if left unaddressed can collectively undermine the nascent state structures and reverse the hard-fought gains made so far. These obstacles and impediments have either been tacitly left unattended by the international community or the US-led alliance has not really been in position to negate them in a comprehensive manner. Among the major problems that Afghanistan faces today are drug trafficking, unabated countrywide warlordism, illicit opium economy, deplorable economic growth, social and ethnic divide, and most importantly, the mounting Taliban-led insurgency which unambiguously challenges the writ of the Afghan government. It is worth mentioning here that some of the social and economic problems in Afghanistan are not just associated with the insurgency, but the insurgency itself acts a major cause and reason for these problems to persist; for, these challenges either help the Taliban in gaining a modicum of legitimacy inside Afghanistan or act as a source of revenue for their armed campaign. For instance, the Pashtun-non-Pashtun divide provides the Taliban a platform to gain sympathy and support in provinces which collectively resent a non-Pashtun dominated regime in Kabul. Similarly, the illicit opium trade, which adversely affects the state economy, acts as a major source of finance for the Taliban movement. Thus the challenges faced by the Afghan government and the international community in Afghanistan are not mutually exclusive; rather, they intersect each other at different levels making it more difficult for the Kabul government and the US-led alliance to address them effectively. Although each of these problems hinder the socio-economic and political development in Afghanistan yet the armed insurgency remains the biggest challenge that harbours the potential to push Afghanistan into the lap of chaos and a renewed civil war. Far important and critical than other challenges remains the need to chart out a way-forward for a peace and reconciliation agreement with the insurgents so that levels of violence can be brought down and security of Afghans ensured. Of late, there has been an overriding emphasis on the need for a political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan. However, the lack of commitment from the international community and the absence of a coherent reconciliation strategy have effectively negated any chances of peace talks with the Taliban. Reconciliation and peace talks as a US policy in Afghanistan actually emerged only as the second-best option while the emphasis at least until 2010 was solely on winning the war by military means. The increasing emphasis on peace and reconciliation was commensurate with the diminishing hopes of an outright victory against the Taliban.

At a time when the transition is just a year away and the Afghan National security Forces (ANSF) are not in position to thwart and contain the insurgency, the need for talks and reconciliation assume paramount importance. The

withdrawal of the foreign troops will mean the absence of an efficient security cover within which the ANSF used to operate. Absent that, the local security apparatus will be handicapped in maintaining, let alone improving, the security scenario in Afghanistan. The security unpreparedness therefore necessitates the implementation of a broad-based reconciliation strategy which can act the sole guarantor of peace and stability in Afghanistan. If the Kabul government aided by the US-led coalition fail to enter into negotiations with the Taliban, the insurgency is only going to take a vicious form once the foreign troops withdraw. In this backdrop, reconciliation with the insurgents remains the only viable policy option that can be instrumental in ensuring lasting peace in Afghanistan. A productive reconciliation process will not only mean the cessation of armed conflict, but can also provide an impetus for the consolidation of democracy and lay the platform for social cohesiveness in Afghanistan. However, any effort aimed at reconciling with the insurgents needs to be a popularly-backed exercise and must not in any way endanger and jeopardise the gains that have been made in the last decade. Women and non-Pashtun factions need to be taken into confidence while seeking reconciliation with the insurgent groups. Securing Afghanistan from continuing armed conflict, therefore, makes it imperative for the Karzai administration and the US-led international alliance to pursue reconciliation so as to negate the chances of Afghanistan falling back into pre-9/11 situation marked by statelessness, chaos and ethnic frenzy.

This paper is an attempt at tracing the history of peace and reconciliation with the Taliban and analyses the pros and cons associated with the process. While the paper argues in support of the idea of peace talks and reconciliation, it highlights the drawbacks and shortcomings in the earlier efforts aimed at pacifying the insurgency. The limitations of the earlier efforts point towards the need for a more comprehensive peace plan wherein reconciliation with not only one section of the insurgency or only with the ground fighters is sought but the scope is expanded to include the prospects of talking and reintegrating the leadership as well. Further, the paper underscores the fact that for any peace and reconciliation process to succeed Afghan government must be put in the lead of the process without any undue arm-twisting from outside. Foreign interference in the process for their own strategic interests can jeopardise the entire effort resulting in an escalation of violence and deepening of mistrust between the insurgents and the Kabul administration. Karzai government or for that matter the succeeding democratic regime in Afghanistan should take on the role of principal negotiator with the Taliban. The paper in the last sections analyses the role of Pakistan in facilitating the peace and reconciliation process. It argues that Pakistan enjoys considerable leverage over the Taliban and allied insurgent groups, and as such, Islamabad can actually play a prominent role in bringing the Taliban leadership on the negotiating table. In disregard for Islamabad's strategic

interests within Afghanistan, however, Pakistan can equally play the role of a spoiler in derailing any peace efforts. Therefore, Pakistan's role as it always has been remains crucial in deciding the outcome of talking to the Taliban.

2. History of Talks: A study of Failed Reintegration Efforts in Afghanistan:

The idea of talking to the insurgents is not entirely novel or unheard of within the corpus of literature pertaining to the post 9/11 state-rebuilding process in Afghanistan. Efforts aiming at mainstreaming ex-combatants or fighters who abandoned the Taliban were put in place soon after the Taliban were driven out of power in late 2001. These efforts were, however, episodic at best and represented a piecemeal endeavour with limited objectives and scope. The quick splendid victory against the Taliban made the US complacent in as far as devising a comprehensive strategy that could have effectively reintegrated those individuals (including even some of the Taliban leadership) who were willing to support the new political process in Afghanistan. Having been defeated in a debilitating manner by the US-led military campaign, the Taliban had reportedly manifested a desire in negotiating a power-sharing agreement with the Interim Administration in Afghanistan. The US, however, was never lured into accepting Taliban's proposals and therefore forced Karzai to drop the idea of reconciling with the Taliban who was very much in favour of an early negotiated political settlement with the ousted regime¹. Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN mediator who negotiated the Bonn Agreement in 2001, is said to have admitted that the 'biggest mistake had been omitting the Taliban from the table at Bonn'. 'Including them might well have achieved a peace that avoided the revival of the Taliban', argues Ahmed Rashid (Rashid, 2012, p. 124). The US "failed to provide those Taliban fighters who did not want to defend al-Qaeda with a way to return to Afghanistan peacefully.... [making] refuge in Pakistan, often with al-Qaeda, a more attractive option" (Rubin, 2007, p. 53). However, in the backdrop of the resurgence of the armed insurgency since 2006, the idea of talking to the Taliban gained wide currency even in the strategic circles in the US. The US came to realise its mistake of not negotiating with the Taliban in as early as 2003 when violence began to erupt in Afghanistan once the Bush Administration had diverted its attention towards the Iraq conundrum. Since then the international community and the Karzai government have come up with a number of initiatives, financially supported by the international donors and aimed at mainstreaming and reintegrating the local militias and former combatants, for their presence was a continuous checkmate to Karzai administration trying to wield control over provinces other than Kabul. Ironically, the process of demobilisation of these armed militias was undertaken in order to cement the authority of the civilian administration in Kabul rather than to contain the Taliban-led insurgency.

Initiatives including Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR), Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) and, Program Tahkim-e-Soleh (PTS) etc were floated by the Karzai government with international support in order to reintegrate former combatants. However, these initiatives were never really implemented under an international oversight and thus were prone to be misused by government officials and local commanders for accruing monetary gains. Economic incentives which were provided to the disarmed and reintegrated individuals, more often than not, became the reason the government officials produced forged lists of such individuals so as to get more money. Moreover, these initiatives had limited scope because they aimed at reintegrating the rank and file members without ever trying to seek negotiations with the top brass of the armed factions. These initiatives came largely as a reaction to the increasing insecurity and violence; and through these efforts the Karzai government and the US sought to disrupt the Taliban insurgency by cutting deals with active and former Taliban rank and file combatants. Rather than dealing with the Taliban as a collective force, these efforts sought to weaken the insurgency by inducing individual Taliban combatants to switch allegiances. The move was aimed at wooing the so-called 'moderate' Taliban to join the political mainstream and support Karzai administration. President Karzai, delineating the logic of who comprised the 'moderate' Taliban remarked: "a clear line has to be drawn between the ordinary Taliban who are the real and honest sons of this country, and those who still use the Taliban cover to disturb peace and security in the country...No one has the right to harass or persecute any one under the name of Taliban" (Stanekzai M. M., 2008, p. 10). The policy of reintegrating the moderate Taliban was endorsed by the US and voiced by the US commander in Afghanistan, General David Barno, when he remarked that "if you are a rank and file Taliban member and you reject your past...then you can become part of the future of Afghanistan" (Burnett, 2003). These initiatives signalled the interest on the part of the US and the Karzai administration to disrupt the Taliban insurgency, however, the focus was still, undeniably and unambiguously, on winning the war militarily rather than through talks and reconciliation.

The inflated figures of the reintegrated combatants under the DDR and ANBP² notwithstanding, the insurgency and the ensuing violence were witnessing new heights towards the end of 2004. To add to this problem was the diversion of US interest towards Iraq which in turn provided the Taliban with a space within Afghanistan to bolster their campaign from a tenuous insurgency to a full-blown one. The Bush Administration became so preoccupied with the Iraq issue that he withdrew 3,000 US troops from Afghanistan leaving the Karzai administration ill-equipped with a nascent army to contain the escalating violence and mounting insurgency. The diversion of strategic oversight and troops to Iraq left Afghanistan vulnerable and the vacuum created thereby was effectively used by the Taliban to gain ascendance in the areas in south and south-east. It was

against the backdrop of a rising insurgent campaign by the Taliban that President Karzai created the Independent Peace and Reconciliation Commission known in Dari as Program Tahkim-e-Soleh (PTS) in 2005. The commission was officially launched as the centrepiece of the first national reconciliation policy. The objective of the commission was to reinvigorate the process of reintegration of Taliban rank and file members and in return offer them general amnesty. PTS chairman Sibgatullah Mojadeddi went to the extent of offering amnesty to Taliban supremo Mullah Omar and Hizb-e-Islami chief Gulbuddin Hekmatyar noting that “our terms are if they lay down their weapons, respect the constitution and obey the government, we don’t have big conditions for them” (Taliban Leader Rejects Ammnesty, BBC, 2005). Although, the US initially supported the Karzai initiative and viewed the effort as an ‘alternative to a heavy military footprint in Afghanistan’, Mojadeddi’s generous offer to Mullah Omar, however, turned the US into its critic. Mojadeddi’s offer, moreover, stood in direct contradiction to two UNSC resolutions – UNSCR 1267 (1999) and 1735 (2006) which collectively sanctioned the Taliban leadership (Stanekzai M. M., 2008). The lack of clarity of goals, inconsistency of efforts, and divergence of approaches resulted in these initiatives producing very little outcome. Contradictory positions taken by the US and the Karzai government quashed the chances of an early breakthrough in talking to the Taliban.

Moreover, talking to the Taliban as a ‘strategy’ was never really agreed upon by all in Afghanistan. Instead, important stakeholders implemented their own self-devised strategies with least commensurability with approaches and policies employed by the Karzai administration. For instance, in the wake of intensifying conflict in the south in 2006, the British commanders entered into a localised truce with the Taliban. Even though the deal helped in attenuating the violence, the British move was criticised by the US as amounting to a partial surrender (Baldwin, 2008). There was enough disagreement even among the western allies over the means and ways of tackling the Taliban insurgency. The differences potentially reduced the chances of converting these local gains into a broad-based reconciliation strategy. Further, peace deals orchestrated by the US allies were equally resented by Karzai, for he believed, and rightly so, that cutting deals with the insurgents outside the purview of Kabul administration limited his government’s legitimacy and reach (John Bew, 2013)³.

From the above discussion it becomes clear that the presence of recurrent flaws in each of these initiatives reduced their efficacy. These shortcomings need to be corrected and effectively kept under check, if and when, any peace and reconciliation talks with the Taliban are on the cards. First, any attempt at reconciliation must not target a specific section of the insurgency. Instead, the strategy ought to be comprehensive and inclusive in character, taking the insurgency as a ‘whole’ and focussing on overall integration of the Taliban –

from top to bottom. Regardless of whether the strategy is a top-down or a bottom-up mechanism, its scope should be expanded to include both the rank and file members as well as the top leadership of the insurgency. Second, the international community has so far relegated Karzai administration in taking any major steps towards reconciliation, what is really of utmost importance in Afghanistan is that international community should project Karzai and his government as the rightful entity entitled to enter into reconciliation with the Taliban. Attempts aimed at undermining the Kabul government will not only prove short-lived as far as negotiations are concerned, but would also, in the long run, prove counterproductive in the process of consolidation of central authority in Afghanistan. Third, and perhaps the most important factor is that peace and reconciliation, as a strategy of ending the conflict in Afghanistan, must be accepted by all and that a comprehensive roadmap be put in place so that the effort is implemented harmoniously and divergence of interests minimized. Difference of opinion among major stakeholders is bound to produce unfavourable results and therefore, it is necessary for the international community and the Afghan government to chart out a peace plan which is reflective of the concerns of all – the Afghans, Kabul government, the and the international community at large.

2.1. Peace and Reconciliation Process since 2009: Gearing up for the Security Transition

Barack Obama's inception as the new President of the US in 2009 was seen as a positive development so far as the US policy towards Afghanistan is concerned. It was widely believed that the new administration would focus more on the Afghanistan war and address the strategic miscalculations done during the Bush era. By ordering as many as 17,000 additional troops to Afghanistan in February 2009, Obama began shifting the country's military effort away from Iraq, as he had promised to do during the presidential campaign. The troop surge as Obama noted "was necessary to stabilize a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, which had not received the strategic attention, direction and resources it urgently required" (Starr, 2012). By the end of the year The US had deployed over 45,000 additional troops in Afghanistan. The initiative was reflective of the renewed America's interest in solving the Afghan conundrum. The initiative of increasing troop presence, often referred to as 'troop surge', was aimed at reversing the momentum of the Taliban insurgency. However, the optimism surrounding Obama's intentions of proactive military engagement in Afghanistan soon faded away when he announced on 16 December 2010 that US troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan starting from July 2011. The announcement of the withdrawal plan defeated the very purpose of the troop surge initiative. The timing and strategic wisdom behind the decision stood in sharp contradiction to the situation prevailing in Afghanistan; Obama's

announcement attracted fierce criticism for it was speculated that the move 'gave the Taliban a reason to lie low and wait out the Americans' (Karon, 2009).

The increased emphasis on the military option in Afghanistan notwithstanding, Obama Administration had come to recognize the inevitability for a reconciliation process as the lasting solution to the conflict. However, the focus still remained largely on dismantling and disrupting the insurgency through hard-power approach. The unconvincing logic of accepting the need for a political solution, yet trying to win the war through increased military presence was dubbed as the 'talk-fight' strategy which became the cornerstone of Obama's policy towards Afghanistan. The strategy aimed at eliminating the rank and file members of the insurgency through military option; while at the same time the negotiations were sought with the top leadership. The policy never really achieved either of the two objectives. "Co-opt the reconcilables, make peace with anyone willing to give up the armed struggle, but simultaneously kill or capture all those who prove themselves to be irreconcilable..." was the underlying principle of the talk-fight strategy (Packer, 2008). The talk-fight strategy, its advocates contended, represented an effective tool in coercing the Taliban leadership to negotiate a political settlement by virtue of creating dissent within the Taliban among those members who opposed talks and those who endorsed the prospects of a negotiated settlement⁴. The efficiency of the strategy was further effectively reduced by the premature announcement of the withdrawal timetable (Byman, 2009, p. 127).

Obama's decision to lay down a withdrawal timetable was not only based on the perceived futility of military option in Afghanistan but his professed eagerness in engaging more actively in Afghanistan was also circumscribed by the dwindling public support (in the US) for continued US presence in the country. These two factors became the reason the US came to openly advocate the necessity of peace and reconciliation with the Taliban. Commenting on the need to pursue negotiations with the Taliban, Obama remarked that peace in Afghanistan will remain elusive until 'reconciliation among former enemies' is sought (John Bew, 2013, p. 27). Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton publicly announced the willingness of the US to negotiate with the insurgency; the preconditions⁵ set by her for negotiations were, however, too unrealistic from the vantage point of Taliban who were at the peak of their armed campaign.

Meanwhile, Karzai himself actively advocated the need for political solution to the conflict. In fact, he outlined the issue of peace and reconciliation as the only motive for which he sought re-election as the President in 2009. Critics argue that Karzai's advocacy of reconciling with the Taliban before the elections was aimed at 'shoring up Pashtun support for Karzai's candidacy, particularly in the disturbed provinces of the country' (Tellis, 2009, p. 6). The US willingness to

talk with the Taliban, aided with Karzai's professed readiness to seek a political solution, became the platform on which the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Programme (APRP) was launched at the January 2010 London Conference. The APRP, as a way forward in Afghan quagmire, was accepted by all major stakeholders in Afghanistan and pledged \$140 million assistance for the initiative. Later on, from June 2-4 2010, a consultative Peace Jirga endorsed the new peace plan and agreed 'that the government and all parties in the conflict should negotiate an end to the violence by working together with all stakeholders, including civil society, in the interest of peace' (Stanekzai M. M., 2012, p. 42). The endorsement of the programme by the Jirga was reflective of the aspirations of the Afghans who yearned to see an end to the conflict by entering into negotiations with the Taliban. The APRP was supposed to implement a peace process that would be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

For ensuring the centrality of the Karzai administration in the process, the control of the new initiative was vested in a 70-member High Peace Council (HPC) appointed by a presidential decree in October 2011. Although the composition of the HPC⁶ remained a contested issue, the initiative was far more comprehensive and strategically feasible. HPC'S mandate included, *inter alia*, the reintegration of combatants willing to renounce violence, confidence building and establishing contacts with the insurgent groups using *Ulema* and provincial officials as intermediaries (Stanekzai M. M., 2012, p. 42). The edifice of APRP stood on the twin principles of reintegration and reconciliation. While reintegration targeted the mainstreaming of rank and file members; 'reconciliation' aimed at negotiating with the senior leadership of the Taliban (Ayman, 2013, p. 8).

Karzai and the donor community were optimistic about the possibility of a breakthrough by the establishment of the HPC, however, the hopes proved short-lived when it became known that the Taliban had out-rightly rejected the idea of talks with the HPC or the Karzai government, reiterating their demand for the withdrawal of foreign troops as the precondition for any negotiations. Although, the HPC at the end of June 2012 claimed to have officially reintegrated over 5000 fighters, the US became wary of its inability to bring the top leadership on the table, and hence became increasingly involved with dealing with the Taliban outside the purview of the HPC and the Afghan government. This time around, there was little room for setting 'high-end redlines' or preconditions, and the need was felt by the US for moderating its earlier stance on reconciling with the Taliban. Thus, from 2011 onwards, the US started to propagate the idea of a political dialogue as the only viable means of ending the conflict in a pacific manner. The preconditions set earlier eventually came to be seen as the desired 'end results' of reconciliation process and this 'significant adjustment in the negotiation formed the basis of political surge' (John Bew, 2013, p. 32).

Nominally, the HPC continued to be the capstone of the peace process, yet behind the scene, it was the US which was involved in wheeling and dealing with the Taliban. The year 2011 witnessed US officials negotiate with the Taliban leadership in Qatar in a bid to ‘accelerate the process of talks’. However, the way such meetings were orchestrated by the US led some critics and analysts to argue that US was more interested in cutting deals with the Taliban so as to secure a respectable withdrawal from Afghanistan for itself unlike the one it had face in Iraq rather than working for a process of national reconciliation in Afghanistan⁷. The removal of the names of the Taliban leaders from al-Qaeda figures on the UN sanctions list was commended as a major confidence-building measure needed for productive reconciliation process (Rashid, 2012, p. 120). The move was reflective of the seriousness of the US towards pursuing a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. Intermittent meetings between the US officials and the Taliban were reported, however, none was able to produce a much needed breakthrough. The impasse in the negotiation process was primarily rooted in the Taliban’s refusal of accepting Karzai’s government as the legitimate regime and their (Taliban’s) antipathy towards the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan.

With each day passing, as the date of International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) drew closer, the US became more open to the idea of talks and reconciliation with the Taliban. The shift in the US policy was a cumulative effect of the increasing intensity of the insurgency; the need to find an exit strategy; and the failure of the Afghan government or the HPC to initiate a durable peace process with the Taliban (John Bew, 2013, p. 34). Renewed American interest in reconciling with the Taliban, nevertheless, culminated in rounds of negotiations between the US officials and the Taliban representatives in Qatar in early 2012. To the dismay of all, the talks were suspended without any major achievement owing to the non-implementation of the CBMs which were earlier agreed upon by the Taliban and the US⁸. The Qatar process, which was restarted in 2013, was again a failure as Taliban closed their office ostensibly for not having been allowed to name their office as The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan or having a Taliban-era (1996-2001) flag on its top. The Qatar process mired in controversy owing to Karzai’s allegations that the ‘Taliban were using the occasion to set up a government in exile’. Taliban later blamed the US and Karzai for the breakdown in talks, accusing both of using the name and flag issue as an excuse. The suspension of talks in Qatar was a severe blow to the reconciliation process given that the Taliban under Mullah Omar had shown readiness in negotiating a political settlement.

Even though United States manifested a desire for talking to the Taliban, its overall policy in Afghanistan kept oscillating between the ‘military option’ and ‘peace talks’ – reducing the efficiency of both. While Taliban continued to gain

momentum and space within Afghanistan, the US troop withdrawal having commenced from mid-2011, gave them enough reason to be less receptive to the peace overtures made by the US or Karzai's reconciliation endeavours. Perhaps, the underlying cause for the failure of the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan has been the incompatible, if not entirely antithetical, interests and approaches employed by the US and the Karzai government.

3. Reconciliation with the Taliban: An Imperative in the wake of Security Transition

The Washington-Kabul Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) which remains yet to be signed by President Karzai and the parliament shall determine the number of the US troops which will remain in Afghanistan beyond 2014. In the event of the BSA not being approved by Karzai or the parliament, the US will be forced to adopt a 'zero option' signalling the complete withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan. However, Karzai has shown willingness to sign the agreement by the end of 2014 and therefore Afghanistan will continue to have not only the expertise of the US troops but also the continuation of a foreign aid pipeline that is indispensable to the sustenance of the Afghan state. Even though BSA stipulates a presence of around 8000 to 12000 troops⁹ US troops in Afghanistan, they will not be a part of the counterinsurgency campaign and will mostly remain involved in the training of the ANA. The US engagement in Afghanistan in the wake of drawdown of its forces will be precisely based on a new strategy of 'advice and assist', so as to ensure a sufficient degree of stability in the country (Jalali, 2012, p. 25).

The debate on Karzai's reluctance to approve the BSA notwithstanding, the Afghan security forces are bound to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining the stability and security throughout the country, and at the same time take the lead in the counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban. Given the lack of professional expertise and the tendency among the low and mid-ranking officials to desert the armed forces and join the insurgency, the question of capitalising on the hard-fought gains made so far remains the most critical aspect of the security transition. The security issues are further compounded by the dwindling influence and control of the central government over large swaths of the country. Collectively, these issues raise concern over the capability of the Afghan state to overcome these challenges and ensure the sustenance of the state structures and the consolidation of democratic authority in Afghanistan. Although, protagonists favouring complete withdrawal of the US troops argue that ANSF are in a position to counter and contain the insurgency without any foreign support, yet the increasing levels of violence and bloodshed are hard to ignore and are a testimony to the fact that Afghan local forces are ill-equipped to deal with the Taliban-led insurgency (Boone, 2013). It is unwise on the part of the international community or the Karzai government to conflate the holding of

elections or the growing number of ANSF troops with peace, given that insurgency as a formidable force not only threatens stability of the state structures and institutions, it also jeopardises the safety and security of the common Afghans who for the better part of last forty years have suffered the most.

Therefore, these challenges call for a durable solution which can best be achieved only through a politically negotiated settlement or a reconciliation process with the Taliban. A coherent peace and reconciliation strategy, with the potential of ending the conflict in Afghanistan and providing the basis for national reconciliation which can in-turn facilitate the bridging of the ethnic divide, thus remains the most viable and desired way-forward in Afghanistan. Notwithstanding the inflexibility of the Taliban in their previous avatar during 1990s, the current insurgency and its leadership has undergone a lot of change. Even though, they still cherish the idea of resurrecting a *Shariah* State in Afghanistan once the foreign troops withdraw, their worldview concerning human rights and tolerance for other ethnic and religious factions has moderated to some extent. Moreover, Taliban have many a times stated publicly that in the wake of a successful peace plan, they will not allow the foreign terrorists to use Afghan territory to threaten other countries. This implies an explicit willingness to disassociate their campaign from al-Qaeda network.

Failures of the past efforts at reconciliation stemmed from the lack of clear objectives, commitment and resources, however, Taliban's inflexible attitude towards accepting Karzai as the legitimate head of the state also proved to be a major obstacle in reaching a mutually acceptable arrangement. Taliban are of the view that the US enjoys de-facto control over the country, and thus any agreements or peace process Taliban agrees to negotiate must be done with the US and not the Karzai, who is dubbed by the Taliban leadership as a US puppet. Further, talks have proven unproductive owing to Taliban leadership not accepting the Afghan constitution. For any successful reconciliation process, it is necessary that such fundamental differences are sorted out and differences narrowed so that parties to conflict can engage in pursuing goal-oriented negotiations.

For a significant portion of Afghan population particularly the non-Pashtuns, Taliban movement during the 1990's represented a repressive regime with least respect for women rights, ethnic diversity and religious pluralism. Despite the seemingly elusive lasting peace in Afghanistan, there is, however, a growing emphasis and consensus among the diplomats, commentators and even Afghans, that a negotiated settlement is indispensable to ending the war in Afghanistan (Bernstein, 2012, pp. 26-27). The endless strife over the last twelve years has led to a remarkable shift in the public opinion in Afghanistan. A majority of the

population in Afghanistan are now in favour of a peace and reconciliation with the Taliban. The role of the public opinion in shaping the process of negotiations with the Taliban is deemed to be of paramount importance. People must identify themselves and their aspirations with a negotiated settlement. Widespread dissent among the Afghans against the process of negotiations and reconciliation runs the risk of exacerbating the conflict. Therefore, it is necessary for the international community and the Kabul government to respect the sentiments of the people and incorporate the popular public opinion within the peace process. Otherwise, if there are too many divisions within the Afghan population or if a substantial section of Afghans is opposed to the idea of talks, reconciliation may actually end up creating more fissures and violence than any peace, stability and security. Disregard for public opinion may further serve to divorce the Afghan people from the central government. Further, Kabul government must ensure that non-Pashtuns and women in general are not left alienated from the process because it is widely believed that the idea of talking to the Taliban is mostly resented by these two sections of the Afghan society. Their sensibilities and genuine concerns need to be given due consideration, and they need to be assured that a negotiated settlement with the Taliban shall in no way jeopardise their security and rights. The 'end-state' emerging out of any peace and reconciliation plan must be acceptable to all Afghans irrespective of their ethnic, religious and regional differences (Jalali, 2012, pp. 31-32). If an agreement with the Taliban is reached upon without taking the Northern Alliance power-brokers into confidence, there is every possibility that the conflict may take the form of a fierce ethnic strife. As Seth Jones remarked in his testimony in 2011, that, 'a peaceful settlement with the Taliban runs the risk of escalating conflict with Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, and anti-Taliban Pashtuns in Afghanistan...Such a settlement could trigger a military build-up among northern commanders a peace settlement with the Taliban runs the risk of escalating conflict with Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, and anti-Taliban Pashtuns in Afghanistan...Such a settlement could trigger a military build-up among northern commanders, causing the war's centre of gravity to shift north. Indeed, reports indicate that northern commanders are already discussing a military build-up if there is a settlement with the Taliban' (Jones, 2011). The fear of negotiating with the Taliban resulting in an escalation of conflict, however, undermines the widespread consensus within the Afghan populace that in order to end the conflict Kabul government must start a reconciliation process with the Taliban. The acceptability of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban among the Afghans can be gauged from number of surveys conducted by various organisations. For instance, surveys conducted by ABC News found that the number of Afghans favouring reconciliation had risen from 60 percent in 2007 to 73 percent in 2009 (Gary Langer, 2010). The results were later corroborated by another survey conducted by Asia Foundation which concluded that approximately 82 percent

of Afghan population appreciated and approved central government's efforts of reconciling with the insurgents.

On the other hand, Taliban, in order to gain a legal political space within Afghanistan, must pursue peace and reconciliation with the Afghan government, because there is little chance that Afghans will accept their movement as an alternative for the current democratic set-up which has at least ensured a modicum of representation of all ethnic factions within the power corridors in Kabul. For Taliban, the armed insurgent campaign stands as a movement against the foreign occupation of Afghanistan, thereby giving their struggle a 'nationalist' touch. If the presence of the foreign troops is really the reason for the Taliban to wage the armed struggle, then the withdrawal of the foreign combat mission can be seen as an opportunity for the Taliban to enter into negotiations with the Afghan government, so as to carve out for themselves a niche and a political space within Afghanistan post 2014. However, given Taliban's stubbornness in not recognising the Afghan constitution and the Afghan government, it seems difficult for any tentative peace efforts to translate into any meaningful agreement.

In spite of the repetitive failure of the past efforts, the HPC is once again involved in high-level peace talks with the Taliban. As a result of continued requests from Afghanistan, Pakistan has freed nearly 40 Taliban prisoners as a confidence-building measure in the hope of kick-starting the peace process. More recently, Pakistan authorities released Taliban's former deputy chief, Mullah Abdul Gani Baradar, who is deemed to be capable of reviving the stalled negotiations with the Taliban. His close association with the Mullah Omar is regarded by some observers to be the key to the prospects of the current peace efforts culminating in a negotiated settlement. However, for any peace talks to take place, a go-ahead nod is always required from Pakistan, for Islamabad will never allow a peace settlement which it perceives to threaten Pakistan's strategic and security interests in the region. Reportedly, Pakistan's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, recently expressed his willingness to talk with the Afghan government on Pakistan's role in the peace process. Attempts at keeping Pakistan at bay are bound to meet failure given the level of influence and leverage that Islamabad enjoys over the Afghan Taliban.

Apart from Pakistan, it also necessary to harmonise the conflicting interests of Afghanistan's regional neighbours within Afghanistan. A peace process with the Taliban is bound to create discontent in Afghanistan's relations with Iran, India and Central Asian states. However, these regional countries must acknowledge the fact that if Afghanistan remains embroiled in armed conflict, its effects and ramifications will transcend Afghanistan's borders and adversely affect the whole region. In order to preserve and forward their own security interests, and

for the sake of peace and stability in Afghanistan, it is imperative for the regional powers to support Karzai in negotiating with the Taliban, so that armed conflict and ethnic divide in Afghanistan can finally be done away with.

4. Pakistan's Role in the Peace Process: A Facilitator or Spoiler:

No country besides Pakistan has suffered more from the protracted conflict in Afghanistan. From the days of Afghan Jihad to the current Taliban-led insurgency against the US troops and their Afghan counterparts, Pakistan has endured ramifications of the Afghan conflict, ranging from the problem of massive influx of Afghan refugees, sectarian violence, ethnic intolerance and more importantly the mushroom growth of radical Islamic outfits which openly challenge the writ of the Pakistani state. Yet, Pakistan's geographical proximity with Afghanistan makes it an indispensable player in the geopolitics of Afghanistan. Moreover, Pakistan's close association with the Afghan Taliban provide it with enough leverage and bargaining power as far as deciding the course of conflict in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's unending patronage for the Taliban, even after the former's alliance with the US in launching the Operation Enduring Freedom, was viewed by analysts as a continuation of Pakistan's decades old policy of search for a pliant and pro-Pakistan regime in Kabul. A friendly political dispensation in Kabul, often referred to as 'strategic depth', is viewed by Pakistan as essential to escape the strategic dilemma of being caught between a powerful adversary in India in the east and an irredentist Afghanistan with claims on the Pashtun dominated areas in the west (Ganaie, 2014, pp. 242-243). It is against this strategic calculation that Pakistan Army and ISI still regard the Afghan Taliban as a strategic asset which can be used by Pakistan to secure its geostrategic interests within the region. The rationale behind Pakistan's unending benefaction for Taliban seems to be driven, in part, by an expanding India's influence and presence inside Afghanistan.

Pakistan remains indispensable for the Taliban to continue their insurgent activities within Afghanistan. Sanctuary and assistance from Pakistan in 2001-2002 helped the defeated and demoralised Taliban to re-group and re-arm, which laid the foundation for the renewed Taliban insurgency since 2003. Porous border with Afghanistan makes Pakistan's tribal areas a secure bastion and a safe haven for the Taliban to plan and launch their offensives within Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan's support and approval is pivotal to any peace process with the Taliban. Although, it is wishful thinking to expect Pakistan to out-rightly abandon the Taliban; yet, Pakistan can play a critical role in making the Taliban to enter into negotiations with the Afghan government or the HPC. As Lisa Curtis notes, 'the loss or threat of loss of sanctuary within Pakistan would also likely motivate the Taliban to seek a compromise through negotiations' (Curtis,

The U.S. Must Move Cautiously on Taliban Reconciliation, 2012). Given a significant space within the negotiations, Pakistan is likely to support a peace process between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Any peace effort with the Taliban, however, is bound to meet failure if Pakistan perceives being bypassed during the process. This tendency became evident in 2010 when Pakistani authorities arrested Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, when he was allegedly involved in negotiating a peace agreement with the Afghan government without Pakistan's consent. Therefore, it is prudent to give Pakistan a space within the peace process so that Islamabad perceives its interests within Afghanistan secured. Pakistan, in the event of a successful peace process, will like to see the Taliban getting a due share in political power in Afghanistan – a leverage Islamabad can use to checkmate any perceived threat within Afghanistan.

For peace to prevail in Afghanistan, Pakistan will have to alter its policy towards the Taliban. Pakistan requires a strategic reassessment of its long-term national security interests within Afghanistan that are best served by a stable, peaceful, prospering and independent Afghanistan (Weinbaum, 2013). Unending violence in Afghanistan is bound to exacerbate the problems for Pakistan itself. Playing the role of a facilitator in peace talks with the Taliban will also enable Islamabad to deal effectively with other radical outfits which collectively question the legitimacy of the Pakistani state. If Pakistan's concerns are left unaddressed, then there is little incentive for the civilian leadership in Pakistan, and more importantly, for the powerful Pakistani Army, to facilitate negotiations with the Taliban. For instance, the US policy of using drone strikes in the tribal areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan may well have helped eliminate key al-Qaeda and Taliban elements, but the strategy, besides having caused massive civilian casualties in the past, proved to be a spoiler when a drone attack killed Pakistani Taliban chief Hakimullah Mehsud on November 1, 2013. The incident gave a major setback to tenuous peace negotiations between the Pakistan government and the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan and thus ended the chances of a negotiated settlement with the terrorist outfit. In the aftermath of Mehsud's killing, Pakistan voiced its criticism of the drone attacks and accused the US of scuttling the nascent peace process with the extremist group. The killing of Mehsud pushed Nawaz Sharif's plans of a negotiated settlement with Pakistani Taliban into complete disarray and instead led to the escalation of violence not only in Pakistan but its effects were manifest in Afghanistan as well (Declan Walsh, 2013). Therefore, the US and its allies must work out a strategy which gives due considerations to Pakistan's domestic predicaments and its interests within Afghanistan, and in return, demand from Islamabad the termination of its policy of providing sanctuary and assistance to the Taliban. What is needed from Pakistan is a strong political will that can put to an end the state policy of using armed non-state actors for furthering state interests. Using Taliban as a proxy in

Afghanistan may serve Pakistan's short-term interests; the policy, however, runs the risk of threatening the social and political milieu within Pakistan itself. A stable and democratic Afghanistan is an imperative for a secure South Asian region in general and Pakistan in particular.

5. Conclusion:

A study of the past peace and reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan reveal that no perceptible gains have been made so far; yet, reconciliation with the insurgents remains the only way of ending the conflict in Afghanistan. An inclusive national reconciliation process is the key to lasting peace in Afghanistan. The current peace process led by HPC is a step in that direction. The release of Mullah Baradar by Pakistani authorities and the assurance given by Nawaz Sharif that Islamabad will facilitate talks between the HPC officials and the former Taliban leaders can certainly help in reviving the peace and reconciliation process. Unlike the past efforts, the HPC and the Karzai administration must ensure that the current process does not suffer from lack of transparency and accountability. The process should be augmented by a coherent strategy, commitment, and resources from the international community. Moreover, support and assistance from regional neighbours, particularly Pakistan, will be a key to the current process culminating in a meaningful peace agreement. Regional powers, despite their differing interests within Afghanistan, must accept that a conflict-ridden Afghanistan is a threat to their own national security interests, and therefore must assist the Karzai government in his endeavour of negotiating with the Taliban, so that the causes of conflict can be addressed effectively.

Notes:

- ¹ It was reported that Taliban's senior leaders – Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Mullah Agha – soon after their regime was ousted by the US military campaign had written a letter to Karzai accepting his nomination as president and expressing a willingness to surrender if they received immunity from being arrested. However, Karzai, under the pressure from the US and the Northern Alliance – which dominated the interim cabinet, was forced to ignore the offer.
- ² The ANBP was launched under the auspices of UNDP in April 2003 with an aim to reintegrate an estimated 100,000 combatants.
- ³ Hamid Karzai's resentment was manifest when he expelled Michael Semple and Mervyn Patterson on the allegations that the duo was involved in talking to the Taliban without his approval.
- ⁴ The logic of 'talk-fight' strategy is summarised by Daniel Byman who argues that 'Talks' may convince insurgent leaders and their cadre 'to reject violence or, in the event of failure, foster dissent within the insurgent group's ranks, which in turn may lead the group to explode'.

- ⁵ The preconditions or the 'redlines' set by Clinton included renouncing ties with al-Qaeda, renouncing violence and armed struggle against Kabul government and accepting the Afghan constitution.
- ⁶ The composition of the HPC was questioned on the grounds of the body being largely comprised of a predominant number of former mujahedeen, factional leaders and the inclusion of very few women. It was claimed that the members of the HPC were ill-qualified for the job.
- ⁷ The Washington-Kabul BSA (which President Karzai is yet to sign) has been seen by many analysts as a means to ensure a safe transition in Afghanistan, which also implies a respectable US withdrawal.
- ⁸ The CBMs included the transfer of Taliban prisoners from Guantanamo Bay to Qatar, and allowing the Taliban to maintain an office in Qatar.
- ⁹ This is the speculated number of US troops which shall remain in Afghanistan beyond 2014. The US has not given a specific number in this regard as of yet.

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