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The Eid Ceasefire in Afghanistan: A Harbinger of Longer-term Peace?

The Afghan government, the Taliban, the United States and the international forces in Afghanistan announced an unprecedented ceasefire over the three days of Eid in June 2018. The ceasefire built on an offer of unconditional peace talks by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in February 2018, a condemnation of terrorism by international and Afghan religious scholars and clerics, and a ceasefire announcement by the Afghan government to celebrate Eid and the end of Ramadan. Scenes of Taliban and Afghan soldiers posing together abounded on the internet during the ceasefire. While the Taliban and the government have since ended the ceasefire and fighting has resumed and ramped up, this paper argues that it will be difficult to put the genie back into the bottle. There are already signs that the fundamentals of interaction between the Taliban and the government have changed.

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Increased Peace Outreach

During the three days of Eid in June 2018, there was an unprecedented ceasefire commitment by the Afghan government, the Taliban, and international security forces in Afghanistan.

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Over 30,000 Taliban fighters were reported to have entered Afghan cities, towns and villages during the ceasefire to celebrate Eid and some of these fighters did not return when the Taliban refused to join the Afghan government in extending the ceasefire.² Interviews with the Taliban members who had stayed behind instead of going back to join the Taliban indicated that they were tired of fighting. The Afghan Ministry of Defense stated that, despite the Taliban's official resumption of fighting, the level of violence had decreased compared to the weeks before Eid.³ The news coming from Afghanistan these days is cause for continuing concern, since the Taliban have a presence in nearly 70 per cent of the country. There have been increased attacks against religious minorities by the Islamic State (ISIS) such as the 1 July 2018 suicide bombing that killed 19 people, most of them members of the country's Sikh minority. Afghanistan has also been experiencing some of the heaviest fighting in years during the summer of 2018. Yet, despite the serious security challenges, there are also increasing prospects for a longer-term peace in Afghanistan, due to a variety of changing domestic, regional and international factors.

28 February 2018: An Offer to the Taliban to join the Peace Process

The increased peace prospects are a result of a series of events during the spring of 2018, which were, in turn, precipitated by domestic, regional and international factors. The first and most visible sign of the changing prospects for peace was Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's offer to the Taliban at the opening of the second Kabul Process meeting on 28 February 2018 to join the peace process. At the meeting in Kabul, which was attended by representatives from Afghanistan, the United Nations (UN) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as well as from over 25 other countries, the delegates mapped out a plan to end the nearly 17 years of war – a war which killed or wounded more than 10,000 Afghan civilians in 2017 alone.⁴ Ghani opened the meeting and stunned the participants by offering talks with the Taliban without preconditions. The offer had the full support of the Afghan High Peace Council, which was set up by former Afghan President Hamid Karzai to negotiate with the Taliban. Signalling the Afghan government's determination to make any peace outreach an

² Karim Amini, "Officials Report Taliban Members 'Tired Of The War'", *Tolo News*, 20 June 2018. <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/officials-report-taliban-members-%E2%80%98tired-war%E2%80%99> 9. Accessed on 20 June 2018.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Afghanistan: 10,000 civilian casualties in 2017- UN report suicide attacks and IEDs caused high number of deaths and injuries", *UNAMA*, 15 February 2018. <https://unama.unmissions.org/afghanistan-10000-civilian-casualties-2017-un-report-suicide-attacks-and-ieds-caused-high-number>. Accessed on 23 June 2018.

Afghan-led endeavour and offering the prospects of legitimacy to the Taliban, Ghani offered recognition to them as a legitimate political group. He proposed several measures to entice them to lay down their arms, including the release of Taliban prisoners, new elections that would include the Taliban as a political entity, helping to remove their name from the international blacklist and a constitutional review.⁵ He also announced that his government would open an office for the Taliban, provide passports to them and their families, and work towards removing international sanctions against their leaders.⁶

Ghani's outreach to the Taliban in February 2018 represented a change in tone by the president known for often calling the Taliban "rebels" and "terrorists". It also was a more comprehensive offer of talks with the Taliban than any he had previously made to different parts of the Taliban movement. The regional and international community praised Ghani's outreach, with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) stating that together with the countries and international organisations participating in the conference, UNAMA "strongly supports the vision for peace through intra-Afghan dialogue and urges all parties involved to engage at the earliest time."⁷ The Taliban, in contrast to their previous outright dismissals of such offers, did not respond to Ghani's offer – a sign of likely divisions among the ranks on how to respond to the offer.

11 May 2018: Islamic Scholars Meeting in Indonesia issues Fatwa against Suicide Attacks

A few months after Ghani's peace outreach to the Taliban, 70 Muslim scholars from Pakistan, Indonesia and Afghanistan met in Indonesia. In a declaration where they affirmed that Islam was a religion of peace and denounced violent extremism, they stated, "We reaffirm that violence and terrorism cannot and should not be associated with any religion, nationality, civilization or ethnic group, as violent extremism and terrorism in all forms and

⁵ Hamid Shalizi and James Mackenzie, "Afghanistan's Ghani offers talks with Taliban 'without preconditions'", *Reuters*, 28 February 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban/afghanistans-ghani-offers-talks-with-taliban-without-preconditions-idUSKCN1GC0J0>. Accessed on 20 June 2018.

⁶ "Ghani Makes Taliban An Offer To Join Peace Process", *Tolo News*, 28 February 2018. <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/ghani-makes-taliban-offer-join-peace-process>. Accessed on 20 June 2018.

⁷ "UNAMA Welcomes Afghan Government's Renewed Call for Unconditional Peace Talks", *UNAMA Press Release*, 28 February 2018. <https://unama.unmissions.org/unama-welcomes-afghan-governments-renewed-call-unconditional-peace-talks>. Accessed on 23 June 2018.

manifestations including violence against civilians and suicide attacks are against the holy principles of Islam.”⁸ At the meeting, the prominent religious scholars issued a fatwa or edict against suicide attacks. In doing so, they helped challenge the Taliban’s narrative of their war as a holy war. The fatwa also likely helped decreased the Taliban’s legitimacy, since “any religious pronouncement against the Taliban or their extremist tactics could strip Taliban’s religious legitimacy, which is the last thing they want to hear”.⁹

17 May 2018: Afghan Activists begin Peace March

Barely a week after the meeting of Islamic scholars in Indonesia, a group of seven ordinary Afghan citizens embarked on a 600-kilometre peace march from Helmand, the Afghan province with the highest opium production and one which is largely governed by the Taliban today, to Kabul. The catalyst for the march occurred a couple of months earlier, when a suicide attack at an open-air wrestling match in the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, killed 13 people. Fed up with the fighting in their region, a group of seven people set up a peace camp, declared a hunger strike and demanded that both the government and the Taliban call a ceasefire. While religious scholars intervened and convinced them to end their hunger strike, they continued their sit-in, and, when meetings with some Taliban members and government officials produced no results, they decided to walk to Kabul to deliver their peace message.¹⁰

The march initially started with eight peace marchers. However, it gathered people along the way in a clear indication that their message of peace and their four demands for ceasefire, peace talks, an inclusive legal system agreed upon by both the Taliban and government, and a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign forces resonated across the country. Traversing a difficult terrain in the hot summer sun, the last half of their march taking place during the holy month of Ramadan where, despite the arduous journey, the marchers kept fast, they were joined by teachers, students, war victims on crutches and another in a wheelchair.¹¹

⁸ “Pak Afghan and Indonesian Islamic scholars issue Fatwa against suicide attacks”, *Times of Islamabad*, 11 May 2018. <https://timesofislamabad.com/11-May-2018/pak-afghan-and-indonesian-islamic-scholars-issue-fatwa-against-suicide-attacks>. Accessed on 20 June 2018.

⁹ Shereena, Qazi, “Will Islamic scholars’ fatwa force Afghan Taliban to join talks?”, *Al Jazeera*, 10 May 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/fatwa-islamic-scholars-force-taliban-join-talks-180507153413480.html>. Accessed on 20 June 2018.

¹⁰ “Afghanistan’s march for peace from Lashkar Gah to Kabul”, *BBC News*, 16 June 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44502443>. Accessed on 21 June 2018.

¹¹ “Helmand Peace Convoy Reaches Wardak”, *Tolo News*, 13 June 2018. <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/helmand-peace-convoy-reaches-wardak>. Accessed on 15 June 2018.

Along the way, the Taliban helped them to keep off mined areas. They were welcomed in villages with people carrying the holy Koran and others singing and dancing, and all along the way, people offered food, drink and rest to them. When the march arrived in Kabul, they were greeted with flower garlands by hundreds of well-wishers in a country exhausted by war. Though the Eid ceasefire was just coming to an end as they reached Kabul, the peace march became a symbol of civil resistance.

4 June 2018: Afghan Ulema Council Meeting in Kabul issues Fatwa against Terrorism

Following the Islamic scholars meeting in Indonesia and while the peace march across Afghanistan was capturing attention throughout Afghanistan, the Afghan Ulema Council of about 2,000 Muslim clerics gathered under a traditional tent in Kabul on 4 June 2018. The religious council declared that terrorism in Afghanistan had no religious basis and that suicide attacks are “haram” or prohibited by Islam.¹² “War in all its types is illegal according to Sharia and Islamic laws, and it is nothing but shedding the blood of Muslims”, the scholars stated in their fatwa.¹³ In the fatwa, where the council members urged the Taliban to engage in peace talks with the Afghan government, they also stated, “We the religious Ulema call on the Taliban to respond positively to the peace offer of the Afghan government in order to prevent further bloodshed in the country.”¹⁴

Many of the council members were conservative Pashtuns who share tribal and religious roots with the Taliban. The strongly-worded fatwa by influential religious scholars/teachers which condemned the use of violence in the name of religion further eroded the Taliban’s legitimacy as an Islamic group. Yet, while the Ulema Council was meeting, a suicide bomber struck at the gathering, killing at least seven people and wounding a dozen others. Though the Taliban denied any involvement in the attack, it was a reminder that the Taliban and other insurgent groups were not easily convinced to lay down their arms. At the same time, the

¹² Sayed Salahuddin, “Islamic State suicide bomber strikes meeting of Afghan clerics who had just condemned terrorism”, *Washington Post*, 5 June 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/suicide-bomber-hits-meeting-of-afghan-religious-figures-condemning-terrorism-killing-14/2018/06/04/00c2b53e-67d9-11e8-bea7-c8eb28bc52b1_story.html?utm_term=.4700030b11b7. Accessed on 15 June 2018.

¹³ David Brennan, “Muslim Clerics Bombed Hours After Declaring Fatwa on Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan”, *Newsweek*. <http://www.newsweek.com/muslim-clerics-bombed-hours-after-fatwa-suicide-attacks-afghanistan-956104>. Accessed on 21 June 2018.

¹⁴ “Islamic clerics hit by bomber right after suicide attack “fatwa”, *CBS News*, 4 June 2018. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/afghanistan-loya-jirga-suicide-bomb-attack-kabul-islamic-clerics-fatwa/>. Accessed on 20 June 2018.

Taliban's quick denial of involvement in a suicide attack against the Afghan religious scholars was also likely an indication of the Taliban wanting to distance themselves from the violence being perpetrated on a peaceful gathering of Afghan religious leaders.

7 June 2018: Afghan Government offers Unprecedented Eight-day Ceasefire

A few days after the Ulema Council meeting in Kabul, Ghani announced a first-ever unconditional ceasefire. The ceasefire, which was to coincide with the end of Ramadan, was initially to be in effect from 12 to 20 June 2018 and was meant to enable Afghans to celebrate Eid. The ceasefire only applied to the Taliban and excluded other terrorist groups such as the ISIS. Ghani, in a video message posted on the Presidential Palace's Facebook page, highlighted the will of the Afghan people to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict, stating, "This ceasefire is an opportunity for the Taliban to realize that their violent campaign is not winning them hearts and minds but further alienating the Afghan people from their cause."¹⁵

The government's ceasefire announcement was greeted with much praise within Afghanistan, in the region, and internationally. The Afghan Ulema Council called upon the Taliban to reciprocate the government's ceasefire, while the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, UNAMA and international heads of states welcomed the ceasefire announcement, with many of them stating their support for an Afghan-led and owned peace process.

9 June 2018: Taliban Respond with a Three-day Ceasefire

Two days after the government's ceasefire announcement, the Taliban agreed to a three-day ceasefire during Eid.¹⁶ Though the Taliban's ceasefire, a first in nearly 17 years since the defeat of the Taliban by the United States (US) troops, only applied to hostilities with domestic troops, the international community, including the US, the UN Security Council (UNSC) and NATO, welcomed it through press statements.¹⁷

¹⁵ Calamur, Krishnadev, "An Opportunity for the Taliban", *Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/afghanistan-ceasefire/562283/>. Accessed on 23 June 2018.

¹⁶ Ahmed Rashid, "What is behind the Eid ceasefire with the Taliban?", *Al Jazeera*, 10 June 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/eid-ceasefire-lead-peace-taliban-180610105510469.html>. Accessed on 12 June 2018.

¹⁷ "On Afghanistan President Ghani's Ceasefire Offer", US Department of State, 7 June 2018. <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/06/283015.htm>. Accessed on 13 June 2018.

The three days of overlapping ceasefires over Eid were the first that saw Afghan security forces and Taliban militants celebrating together and was adhered to by both sides. Scenes of as many as 30,000 Taliban fighters entering government-controlled cities, hugging, laughing, posing together with Afghan citizens, politicians and even government troops for selfies celebrating Eid together, abounded. Though Eid celebrations were marred by several violent attacks throughout the country, the ISIS claimed responsibility for all of them.

15 June 2018: Statement by former Jihadi Leader Abdul Rab Rasoul Sayyaf to end Violence

A few days after the end of Eid, former Jihadi leader, Abdul Rab Rasoul Sayyaf, gave a press statement where he highlighted that suicide bombings, war and explosions are not permissible under Islamic law. He also argued that the Taliban needed to stop its hostilities and join the government's peace process, "I call on anti-government armed militants to stop this forbidden war. It is an obligation of the people to make a firm decision and agree that the war must end."¹⁸

16 June 2018: Afghan Government Extended Ceasefire for 10 days

After a successful three-day ceasefire and in a sign of the government's determination to convert the ceasefire into longer-term peace prospects, the Afghan government announced that it would further extend the ceasefire by 10 days.¹⁹ The government may also want to demonstrate its commitment on its peace outreach, especially after receiving praise by local, regional and international actors. The Russian foreign ministry released a statement welcoming the ceasefire's extension.²⁰ The Iranian foreign ministry made similar statements.

¹⁸ Anisa Shaheed, "Sayyaf Calls For Extension Of Govt-Taliban Ceasefire", *Tolo News*, 15 June 2018. <http://prod.tolonews.com/afghanistan/sayyaf-reacts-ceasefire-calls-taliban-end-war>. Accessed on 23 June 2018.

¹⁹ "Afghan president extends ceasefire with Taliban by 10 days", Reuters, 17 June 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-palace/afghan-president-extends-ceasefire-with-taliban-by-10-days-idUSKBN1JD0R6>. Accessed on 21 June 2018.

²⁰ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Comment by the Information and Press Department on the ceasefire in Afghanistan", 18 June 2018. http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreignpolicy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3262605. Accessed on 21 June 2018

17 June 2018: Taliban rules out Ceasefire Extension

The next day, the Taliban rejected the offer to extend the ceasefire and ordered its fighters to resume fighting. However, a number of Taliban fighters stayed back in government-controlled areas, refusing to go back to fight, in an indication of the changing prospects for peace in Afghanistan.

The Rising Momentum for Peace

The series of events outlined above indicates a rising momentum for peace within Afghanistan. In addition to the domestic pressures building on the Taliban, regional and international pressures, as well as continued military pressure have increased the momentum for peace.

Domestic Pressures for Peace

The driving force for peace within Afghanistan is that the majority of Afghans are simply fed up with the incessant violence. They want the civil war to end as soon as possible and have, therefore, prioritised peace over justice.²¹ The 2017 Asia Foundation survey found that, although optimism has increased slightly, security (69.5 per cent), economic concerns (39.9 per cent) and governance issues (36.9 per cent) were the three most commonly cited reasons for pessimism in the country.²²

One of the main and rising domestic pressures on both the Afghan government and the Taliban is the rise of a grassroots peace movement within Afghanistan, pressuring both sides to compromise and negotiate a peace deal. When the Helmand peace protests started, many analysts dismissed them as unlikely to yield results. However, the pro-peace protests then spread within Helmand, (Afghanistan's province with the highest level of insecurity) and subsequently to several other provinces. The Afghan Ulema Council met with the protestors

²¹ Kate Clark, "How to End the Afghan War? A new publication on peace reviewed", *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 2 June 2018. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/how-to-end-the-afghan-war-a-review-of-a-new-publication-on-peace/>. Accessed on 17 June 2018.

²² The Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2017: A survey of the Afghan people", p 6. https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2017_AfghanSurvey_report.pdf. Accessed on 16 June 2018.

in Helmand, declaring its support for the protestors, thereby bolstering their legitimacy. When the group of eight protestors started its march to Kabul and was greeted warmly throughout its walk, the protestors' legitimacy was further bolstered as dozens of strangers joined their march. In Kabul, government officials, from local politicians to Ghani, met with them, making promises to meet their demands, thereby further highlighting the growing domestic appeal and power of their movement.

The academic literature on peace movements, even in conflict situations, gives further cause for optimism that the growing peace movement within Afghanistan might bring the Taliban and the government to negotiate peace talks. A study by Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth highlights that the use of non-violent campaigns has proven to be an effective means of resistance in places such as Madagascar, Serbia, Georgia, Lebanon, Ukraine and Nepal, and debunked the conventional wisdom that violent campaigns are the most effective way to achieve policy goals.²³ In Afghanistan, both the government and the Taliban have realised that their domestic support is decreasing, with increasing desertion rates among the Afghan security forces as well as the Taliban. The peace movement has been a compelling alternative to political violence and has offered a fresh alternative to end the intractable conflict and gradually move towards a long-term and sustainable peace process.

Another factor that has increased domestic pressure for peace is the growing insecurity in the country and the need for the Afghan government to explore fresh approaches to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. The 2017 Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan report stated that the Taliban have control over around 11 per cent of the country.²⁴ In addition, the Taliban have a presence in almost 70 per cent of the country. There is also evidence to suggest that the number of Taliban militants has increased two-fold in the last four years.²⁵ Together, these factors have put pressure on the Afghan government to bolster its decreasing legitimacy by making increased efforts to engage the Taliban.

²³ Stephan, Maria J., Chenoweth, Erica, "Why Civil Resistance Works", *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Summer 2008), p. 8.

²⁴ Department of Defense (United States of America), "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan", Report to Congress In Accordance With Section 1225 of the Carl Levin and Howard P. "Buck" McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015 (P.L. 113-291), as amended, June 2017, p 19. https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/June_2017_1225_Report_to_Congress.pdf. Accessed on 17 June 2018.

²⁵ Courtney Kube, "The Taliban is gaining strength and territory in Afghanistan", NBC News, 31 January 2018. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/numbers-afghanistan-are-not-good-n842651>. Accessed on 23 June 2018.

Moreover, since both the parliamentary and presidential elections will take place in 2018 and 2019 respectively, the government needs to restore public confidence and show progress. Though the country's Independent Election Commission has started preparations for the elections,²⁶ a survey by ATR Consulting and Tolo News has shown that Ghani's popularity has plunged over the years.²⁷ There were high hopes that Ghani would usher in a new era of stability and peace when he was elected in 2014, with 60 per cent of Afghans surveyed stating they were highly satisfied with Ghani during his first month in office.²⁸ However, there was a significant drop in his approval rating in 2015, with only 27.5 per cent of the population saying that they were very satisfied with his performance.²⁹ The lack of public confidence in the Afghan government in the run-up to elections could also have compelled the government to seek peace talks with the Taliban.

Though the growing insecurity in Afghanistan might lead one to think otherwise, there is also rising pressure on the Taliban to negotiate a peace deal with the Afghan government in a country decimated by, and tired of, war. The Taliban's statements that the Afghan government lacks legitimacy and is a puppet government ruled by foreign actors have increasingly rung hollow, with the growth of the domestic peace movement and demands by the movement to negotiate a peace deal with government on the one hand, and the demands by the Taliban that they want to directly negotiate with the US instead of the Afghan government.³⁰ Pressure has further built on the Taliban after the issuing of the two fatwas against terrorism by Afghan religious leaders this year, and the recent Eid ceasefire and joyful celebrations of Taliban and government fighters. Though the Taliban refused to extend the ceasefire and have gone back to fighting, signs of rebellion within the Taliban are visible from the fact that hundreds of Taliban fighters refused to return to fighting, as well as from statements by Taliban leaders, particularly in the northern part of the country, which

²⁶ Office of the President (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan), "IEC Progress on preparations for elections commended", 11 April 2018. <https://president.gov.af/en/news/iec-progress-on-preparations-for-elections-commended/>. Accessed on 15 June 2018.

²⁷ "Presidential Approval Rating", *Tolo News*, 6 January 2015. <http://atr-consulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Edited-Tolo-Version.pdf>. Accessed on 15 June 2018.

²⁸ "Poll Finds 84 Percent of Afghans Approve of Ghani's Performance", *Tolo News*, 2 November 2014. <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/poll-finds-84-percent-afghans-approve-ghanis-performance>. Accessed on 15 June 2018.

²⁹ "Presidential Approval Rating", *Tolo News*, 6 January 2015. <http://atr-consulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Edited-Tolo-Version.pdf>. Accessed on 15 June 2018.

³⁰ Memphis Barker, "Taliban publish letter calling on US to start Afghan peace talks", *Guardian*, 14 February 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/14/taliban-publish-letter-calling-us-start-afghan-peace-talks>. Accessed on 22 June 2018.

indicated that some factions are ready to negotiate with the government.³¹ Overall, the government's peace offer is an attractive proposition since it provides the Taliban with a pathway to retaining power and legitimacy by contesting elections as a political party.

Regional and International Pressures for Peace

In addition to rising domestic pressure to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in Afghanistan, the Afghan government has been under pressure by regional and international actors to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Regional countries, from China to Iran, as well as influential international countries, from the US to Russia, have repeatedly expressed their support for a peaceful domestic resolution to the conflict in Afghanistan. They have also hosted multiple peace conferences, such as the 2017 International Afghanistan Peace Conference in Russia, to explore pathways for long-term reconciliation.³² During the 2018 Tashkent conference, 22 countries ratified a declaration, stating their collective support for the Afghan government and its efforts to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the violence in Afghanistan.

Though the ceasefire was an Afghan-initiated and an Afghan-led endeavour, regional actors have helped over the past years to set the path for negotiations. In particular, Pakistan was the host of peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban in 2015. Furthermore, the Pakistani government and army, which have been crucial players in the Afghan conflict, have signalled their support for reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban Afghanistan. Pakistan has come under increasing pressure from China to ensure security along the border areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan where China is making huge investments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and the Gwadar port in Pakistan. China is also building a military base for Afghan armed forces in the northeastern part of Afghanistan, which borders China and Pakistan and has offered that Afghanistan join the CPEC.³³ Chinese pressure on Pakistan to protect Chinese economic

³¹ Euan McKirdy, "Taliban factions interested in reaching Afghan peace settlement, Mattis says", *CNN*, 13 March 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/13/asia/mattis-afghanistan-taliban-peace-talks-intl/index.html>. Accessed on 23 June 2018.

³² News Desk, "International Afghanistan Peace Conference starts in Moscow", *Express Tribune*, 14 April 2017. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1383473/international-afghanistan-peace-conference-starts-moscow/>. Accessed on 15 June 2018.

³³ "Taliban Leader Issues Eid Message, Calls for Talks", *Tolo News*, 13 June 2018. <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/taliban-leader-issues-eid-message-calls-talks-0>. Accessed 22 June 2018.

investments in Pakistan has further incentivised Pakistan to support the peace outreach between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Global Pressures

Besides regional actors, there has also been increasing pressure by international actors to find a peaceful solution to the violence in Afghanistan. The US government, in particular, has increased pressure on Pakistan to stop nurturing terrorist organisations in Afghanistan. US President Donald Trump warned Pakistan to stop providing safe havens to Afghan militants and Washington has already taken punitive action by cutting its funding to Pakistan and placing it on the International Financial Action Task Force.³⁴ This move forces Pakistan to take greater action against terror groups which it has been harbouring all this while. Moreover, the US government has repeatedly stated that, while peace efforts in Afghanistan need to be Afghan-led, it is ready to help facilitate talks between the government and the Taliban.³⁵

Continued Military Pressure on the Taliban

Pressure on the Taliban to find an alternative to winning the war through a military solution has also come from a changed security policy under the Trump administration. Unlike the Barack Obama administration, which had started a significant drawdown of American troops in Afghanistan, Trump has increased the US troop presence to 14,000,³⁶ while US military leaders have repeatedly stated that the forces' levels need to be driven by the security situation within Afghanistan.³⁷ Recently, General John Nicholson indicated, in a press

³³ Kucera, Joshua, "Report: China Building Military Base on Afghan-Tajik Border", *EurasiaNet*, 7 January 2018. <https://eurasianet.org/s/report-china-building-military-base-on-afghan-tajik-border>. Accessed on 17 June 2018.

³⁴ Kay Johnson and Drazen Jorgic, "Global watchdog to put Pakistan back on terrorist financing watchlist: sources", *Reuters*, 23 February 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-militants-financing/global-watchdog-to-put-pakistan-back-on-terrorist-financing-watchlist-sources-idUSKCN1G70X7>. Accessed on 17 June 2018.

³⁵ Gulabuddin Ghubar, "US Ready To Facilitate Talks Between Govt And Taliban", *Tolo News*, 21 June 2018. <http://prod.tolonews.com/afghanistan/us-ready-facilitate-talks-between-govt-and-taliban>. Accessed on 23 June 2018.

³⁶ Alex Ward, "Trump is sending more than 3,000 troops to Afghanistan", *Vox*, 19 September 2017. <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/9/19/16227730/trump-afghanistan-3000-troops-mattis>. Accessed on 23 June 2018.

³⁷ Greg Jaffe and Missy Ryan, "Up to 1,000 more U.S. troops could be headed to Afghanistan this spring", *Washington Post*, 21 January 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/up-to-1000->

statement, that there have been some informal discussions between the Taliban and the government.³⁸ The incoming US general and commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan has pointed out that a hasty withdrawal of US troops would have negative consequences for US national security and that dealing with safe havens for terrorists in Pakistan has to be part of the solution for peace to be possible in Afghanistan.³⁹ The signals by the US and NATO commander of forces in Afghanistan indicate a longer-term commitment to fighting the Taliban and, thereby, pressuring them to come to the table for peace negotiations.

Conclusion

Despite an increase in insecurity in Afghanistan over the past year and a Taliban presence in nearly three-fourths of the country, a series of recent events and growing regional and international factors are changing internal dynamics, increasing the likelihood that the Taliban and the Afghan government will find a peaceful resolution to the 17 years of conflict in their country. Though peace in the near future still remains unlikely, especially after the Taliban ruled out a ceasefire extension, recent events have decreased the legitimacy of the Taliban and put it under increasing pressure to negotiate with the Afghan government. Chief among these domestic factors has been the peace and ceasefire outreach by the Afghan government, the historic Eid ceasefire and the growth of an Afghan peace movement. Together, these factors have undercut the Taliban's claim that they represent the true will of the Afghan people. In addition, pressure by regional and global actors, including gatherings of Islamic scholars condemning the war in Afghanistan. Local, regional and global authorities are also keeping up the pressure on the Taliban to negotiate peace. In the lead-up to a major conference of Islamic scholars in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on 9 June 2018, the spokesperson for the delegation of Afghan clerics stated that the war in Afghanistan is illegal and has no root

more-us-troops-could-be-headed-to-afghanistan-this-spring/2018/01/21/153930b6-fd1b-11e7-a46b-a3614530bd87_story.html?utm_term=.e065ebc33387. Accessed on 24 June 2018.

³⁸ US Department of Defense, "Department Of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson via Teleconference from Kabul, Afghanistan", 30 May 2018. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1535817/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-nicholson-via-teleconference-fr/>. Accessed on 17 June 2018.

³⁹ Mir Aqa Popalzai, "Nominated US-Forces Chief Warns Against Any Troop Withdrawal", *Tolo News*, 20 June 2018. <https://www.tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan/nominated-us-forces-chief-warns-against-any-troop-withdrawal>. Accessed on 22 June 2018.

in Sharia law.⁴⁰ Afghan authorities also expect the conference to declare the Taliban's war as being un-Islamic.⁴¹ The winds of change are beginning to blow in Afghanistan. Domestic and international factors contributed towards the Eid ceasefire and these factors will continue to exert pressure on the Taliban to respond to the peace deal offered by Ghani and back by a domestic peace movement, and regional and global actors.

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⁴⁰ "Kabul Experts Expect Global Islamic Summit To Declare Taliban Jihad 'Un-Islamic'", *Gandhara News*, 9 July 2018. <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/kabul-expects-global-islamic-summit-to-declare-taliban-jihad-un-islamic-/29353664.html>. Accessed on 10 July 2018.

⁴¹ Ibid.