

## Pakistan's Taliban Dilemma

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### Summary

*With a prospective United States-Taliban peace deal, the American role in war and peace in Afghanistan will diminish. And Pakistan and the Taliban will have an enhanced role. However, Pakistan has to carefully weigh its future approach to the Afghan conflict as it will matter even more than before for itself and for Afghanistan. Pakistan should start looking at scenarios other than the return of the Taliban to full power in Afghanistan. The Taliban are no longer just a foreign policy issue for Islamabad. Pakistan's ongoing struggle against militant organisations will not fully succeed without containing the Taliban. With the Taliban at the helm in Kabul, any foreign policy benefit will come at a domestic cost. Pakistan should strengthen its dialogue with Kabul, work with China and also bring other countries in the region on board. It will improve Pakistan's regional profile. And we may see some realistic prospects of peace in Afghanistan.*

The assassination of Iran's top military leader, Qasem Soleimani, has triggered a dangerous crisis in United States (US)-Iran relations that is likely to have reverberations for the American exit strategy for Afghanistan. And by enhancing instability in the Middle East, the crisis may also release forces such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria that could have a ripple effect on the security situation in Afghanistan.

As it is, the US-Taliban negotiations were already getting difficult even without this new development as Washington was making some fresh demands. The US currently has about 13,000 troops in Afghanistan, of which 5,000 are engaged in counterterrorism operations. As part of a possible deal with the Taliban, Pentagon has reportedly been considering several options to reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan. One option is to leave a small force with strictly a counterterrorism mission, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Miley, told the Congress on 11 December 2018.

Earlier, General Miley had told *ABC News* in a 10 November 2019 interview, that the objective of the Afghanistan war had not been achieved. The US forces would "...stay for many more years in Afghanistan till it is no longer deemed a threat to the US mainland. We have to go back to the original reason we are in Afghanistan to begin with, which is 9/11. We went there to make sure Afghanistan would never again be a safe haven for terrorists that would attack the United States. That mission is not complete."

In the negotiations with the Taliban, Washington has been seeking a drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan in exchange for an agreement that could establish a framework for future "peace". At best, the agreement could include a Taliban commitment to a ceasefire and the start of a dialogue with Kabul with the timetable of the US troops withdrawal tied to fulfilment of their part of the bargain by the Taliban. At worst, Washington could merely get the Taliban agreement not to support terrorism and terrorist outfits and take measures that "reduce

violence”, in the words of US officials, and also promise to start a dialogue with Kabul at some unspecified future date.

So, what is going on? How does one reconcile US President Donald Trump’s promise to end America’s wars with the military’s planning for their future engagement in Afghanistan? The fact is the deal abandoned by Trump in September 2019 had too much of a Taliban imprimatur and fell short of the president’s political needs for re-election as well as America’s security and strategic interests. The military seems to have prevailed on him that he can leave some force behind and achieve both the objectives. The challenge is whether the Taliban will agree. Afghanistan would, of course, be happy and so will be India but Pakistan will face a dilemma. If the Taliban agree, Pakistan will also follow suite. However, if the Taliban do not, there could be problems. Pakistan’s role in making the Taliban agree will be crucial.

Pakistan’s role will be enhanced even otherwise. With the US role diminishing, the two commanding forces of change will be the Taliban and Pakistan – one internal the other external. Pakistan has to weigh carefully about the future shape the Afghan conflict may take, as its role will matter more now than before for itself and for Afghanistan.

It would be helpful if Pakistan kept the following facts in view as it charted the post-US drawdown policy towards Afghanistan. Pakistan should start looking at scenarios other than the return of the Taliban to full power in Afghanistan. Why not work with the Afghan government? It is not the 1990s when the field was left clear to Pakistan. Now it is crowded. And it is not the same Afghanistan.

Pakistan has to pull back and, for its own sake and the sake of Afghanistan’s peace and stability, act dispassionately. Pakistan has been saying that it did not have the kind of leverage to be able to deliver the Taliban as desired by the US. Its own assessment was it was against Pakistan’s interest to create an enemy out of them. Due to the Taliban’s religious cultural and ethnic affinities with its tribal population, Pakistan may find it difficult to expel them anyway Islamabad might have felt.

Pakistan has to calculate as to what is worse – the blowback of taking a tough action against them or the spill-over of their radicalism into Pakistan if they are in full power in Kabul? However, Pakistan must seriously consider the blowback of the Taliban-ruled Kabul on Pakistan’s internal religious and cultural make-up which has become vulnerable to extremist influences in the past two decades specially but overall since the Afghan Jihad of the 1980s. Afghanistan is not just a foreign policy challenge for Pakistan. Pakistan’s ongoing struggle against militant organisations will not fully succeed without containing the Taliban.

It is true Pakistan was not responsible for the creation of the Taliban but let us face it – their origin was never truly an Afghan phenomenon. They were product of Pakistani madrassas and their rise was facilitated by support from within Afghanistan and militant outfits in Pakistan and the so-called Arab Afghans, Al Qaeda and outliers from Central Asia who had a vested interest in creating an Afghanistan that could shelter them all and provide them a launching pad for their jihadist activities in the region and beyond. And the intra-tribal rivalries and in-fighting among rival groups in the Afghan civil war also helped.

However, how does Pakistan ensure that a future Afghanistan will not be inconsistent with its legitimate security and strategic interests without the Taliban in power? It should work with the

Afghanistan government and also let India get into the picture. Keeping India out strengthens Kabul's suspicion that Pakistan is using the Taliban as its surrogate in Afghanistan and would never trust Islamabad as being an honest broker. Also, it should work with China who wants a stable Afghanistan and Pakistan for the realisation of its Belt and Road Initiative vision. And last but not least, it should bring Iran on board. It will improve Pakistan's regional profile and one can see some realistic prospects of peace in Afghanistan.

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