

Reconciling Regional Differences: Pivotal to Afghan Reconciliation

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Summary

The peace process in Afghanistan will add a new chapter to the country's violent history. This paper discusses the interests and positions of the key stakeholders in the Afghan conflict as the world gets ready for the United Nations-led multilateral process to be held in Turkey, in line with the Joe Biden administration's new Afghan policy. Recent developments show that the Taliban are a reality; they are getting support from different quarters. Islamabad remains the key to the implementation of Washington's new strategy on Afghanistan, which also seeks to incorporate the Indian perspective. However, attaining a workable solution to the Afghan conflict will be difficult without eliminating deep-rooted mutual distrust between the Afghan government and the Taliban, as well as minimising the level of violence.

In order ensure Afghanistan's peace and stability, the forthcoming United Nations (UN)-led multilateral conference in Turkey,¹ as part of the Joe Biden administration's new Afghan policy, would need to manage a number of critical challenges, one of which is to reconcile disparate interests of regional stakeholders in Afghanistan. The participants in the conference must agree on discouraging the use of force as a means of resolving conflict. Though there is a consensus among all regional stakeholders that Afghanistan must be stabilised, they should also unambiguously promote an inclusive security dialogue among themselves as a means of building confidence.

Another big challenge will be to understand the true motivations of the Taliban as there is no unanimity about what they seek from the peace process. Even after the February 2020 deal in Doha, the Taliban have continued conducting attacks during the intra-Afghan negotiations to strengthen its bargaining position.² The Taliban's current attitude exudes a confidence that victory is within their grasp. One group of experts fears that the Taliban's involvement in the peace parleys is just an attempt to remove American forces from Afghanistan so that they regain control over Kabul. Another view is that the ultimate objective of the Taliban is to settle scores with its adversaries and reestablish the Islamic emirate. No one can guarantee that the Taliban would transform themselves and not return to violence following their substantial rehabilitation in Kabul. However, assuming that the group can never be a negotiating partner has already carried a heavy cost that the United States (US) is no longer willing to pay.

¹ Menekse Tokyay, 'Turkey to host Afghanistan peace meeting in April', *Arabnews*, 12 March 2021. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1824181/middle-east>.

² Ayaz Gul, 'Afghan Violence Surges Ahead of Turkey-Hosted Peace Conference', *VOA*, 4 April 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/afghan-violence-surges-ahead-turkey-hosted-peace-conference>.

To add to the complexity, not only are Iran, China and Russia already facing different layers of American sanctions, but they are also being cajoled by Washington to assist in its uncertain exit strategy. Moreover, Biden does not want the US to be seen as withdrawing its forces on 1 May 2021 without a political settlement as it would translate into the collapse of the peace process accompanied with the scramble for power that would certainly lead Afghanistan into a bloodier civil war. Biden's logic is straightforward: a faltering peace process is far more feasible than the ugliness that would follow an abrupt exit without a political settlement.

American Interests and Position

The primary objective of the US military involvement in Afghanistan is to ensure that the Pashtun-majority nation is not used to mount terrorist attacks on the US homeland and its allies. Over the last two decades, the US presence has also been aimed at curbing terrorism and other forms of criminality on Afghan soil. However, there are increasing concerns that the Taliban are still supporting the al-Qaeda.³ We must not forget that the US had invaded Afghanistan after the ruling Taliban refused to hand over Osama bin Laden.

The US is also interested in safeguarding America's geopolitical interests in Afghanistan. Biden would like to ensure that the withdrawal of American troops should not harm the geopolitical interests of the US and its allies.

As the world has entered the era of US-China strategic competition, the US will be keen to prevent China's growing political and economic influence in Afghanistan. While the Donald Trump administration had made gestures to accommodate India-Iran interests in Afghanistan, it remained strongly opposed to Afghan-China cooperation.

The US military presence in Afghanistan also ensures that Washington has sufficient coercive leverage aimed at influencing Iranian affairs, particularly curtailing Tehran's power projection capabilities in the region.

Monitoring Pakistan's nuclear assets has been an important US objective, and presence in Afghanistan makes it a little easier. Pakistan's nuclear programme was the bone of contention between Washington and Islamabad in the 1990s even though it was dormant in the previous decade due to America's need for Pakistani support to counter Russian occupation of Afghanistan.

The US has also attempted to influence Pakistan's Afghan policy in accordance with American interests. Pakistan Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa's recent speech calling for "burying the past" is being seen as Washington's attempt to encourage Pakistan to reorient its India policy, which will directly impact its Afghan policy, in a positive direction.⁴

³ Lindsay Maizland, 'The Taliban in Afghanistan', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 15 March 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/background/taliban-afghanistan>.

⁴ C Raja Mohan, 'Tripping on geo-economics', *The Indian Express*, 31 March 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-pakistan-ceasefire-army-general-qamar-javed-bajwa-foreign-policy-7251915/>.

The US has often promoted Indian interests in Afghanistan which are seen compatible with American interests. Also, India has been invited to the UN-led multilateral process only at its behest.

It remains to be seen how the Biden administration convinces the Taliban to finalise a new exit deadline or to maintain a small counter-terrorism military mission without provoking them to indulge in violence. The US may also like Russian and Chinese support at the UN Security Council to mandate a peacekeeping operation to prevent the Taliban's return to war.

Pakistan's Interests and Position

Pakistan has been using the Taliban as a proxy to achieve its geopolitical interests in Afghanistan. India and the US have been instrumental in slowing down Pakistan's attempts to realise its aspirations, but a combination of factors have led to the Taliban's victory against counterinsurgency operations of the world's most powerful security alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and three US administrations.

Pakistan's ultimate aim has been to ensure a weak Afghan state that could be controlled and manipulated from Rawalpindi. Islamabad desires to curb Indian influence on the Kabul regime that would reduce the threat of Indo-Afghan partnership.

Pakistan has been supporting the Taliban as the main partner in expanding its strategic interests in Afghanistan. Many hardliners in Pakistan view the Taliban as an extension of Pakistan's security forces.

Pakistan wants to curtail American influence in Afghanistan, but is also scared of a hasty American exit.

Pakistan is the leading advocate of the Taliban's integration into Afghan administrative and political decision-making structures. It would never like the Taliban to agree to a ceasefire until the group secures sizeable political benefits in exchange.

While Pakistan has helped bring the Taliban to negotiate with the US and the Kabul regime, it is yet to eliminate the Taliban's Pakistan-based logistic capacities. The Taliban will continue to receive sanctuary inside Pakistan to resume hostilities if talks in Turkey fail, and there is no possibility of Pakistan's military crackdown on the Taliban.

Pakistan perceives Afghanistan as a bridge to intensify its trade and investments in Central Asia.

Creating tensions in the Kashmir valley by supporting India-centric Afghan jihadist groups has also been a long-standing aim of Pakistan's foreign policy. However, the recent ceasefire between India and Pakistan along the Line of Control gives some reason for cautious optimism on this front.

Russia's Interests and Position

Russia has shifted its position from welcoming American involvement to seeking to balance it. Moscow now regards American presence on Afghan territory as a threat to its broader geopolitical interests in the region.

A stable Afghan state is imperative for Russia to forge economic linkages for reciprocal benefit. Russia wants to strengthen security along Tajik-Afghan border to safeguard the region from varied security threats aimed at Moscow's immediate periphery.

In order to fill the void left after the impending US exit, Moscow has hosted many meetings between the Taliban and Afghan representatives over the last few years. On 18 March 2021, Russia convened a meeting attended by the representatives from Kabul regime and the Taliban, along with those from the US, Iran, China and Pakistan. However, India was absent. During his recent visit to Islamabad in early April 2021, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov underlined Moscow and Islamabad's "concurrence or similarity of approaches" on Afghanistan.⁵

To prevent terrorism threat at Russia's porous borders is another important Moscow aim. And one of the key justifications given by Moscow in engaging the Taliban has been to defeat the Islamic State (ISIS). Much to the consternation of Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, Russia has also supported formation of an "interim inclusive administration" in Afghanistan, which is seen as "a logical solution to the problem of integrating the Taliban into the peaceful political life."⁶

India's Interests and Position

New Delhi has worked hard to increase its soft power resonance in Afghanistan through infrastructure development. India has also intensified its economic investments in Afghanistan, earning positive image and admiration of majority of Afghans. So far, India has provided US\$3 billion (S\$4.03 billion) assistance to Afghanistan.⁷

India has supported the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, refusing to legitimise the Taliban as a political actor. Since Pakistan continues to pose the biggest hindrance to India's Afghan policy, New Delhi will remain realistic about its expectations from the UN-led talks in Turkey.

⁵ Asad Hashim, 'Afghanistan tops agenda of Russia-Pakistan talks in Islamabad', *Al Jazeera*, 7 April 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/7/afghanistan-tops-agenda-of-russia-pakistan-talks-in-islamabad>.

⁶ AFP, 'Russia for Taliban's inclusion in Afghan interim govt.', *The Hindu*, 13 March 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/russia-for-talibans-inclusion-in-afghan-interim-govt/article34055132.ece>.

⁷ Geeta Mohan, 'Jaishankar holds talks with Afghanistan Foreign Minister, discusses Afghan peace process', *India Today*, 23 March 2021. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/jaishankar-afghanistan-foreign-minister-afghan-peace-1782623-2021-03-23>.

India wants to develop Afghan infrastructure so as to get access to Central Asia, particularly its natural energy resources. This is what was invoked by Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan, in a recent speech underlining the advantages to India in terms of better trade and connectivity to resource-rich Central Asia if peace is restored between New Delhi and Islamabad.⁸

New Delhi has also viewed Afghanistan as a site to counter Beijing's growing influence in Central Asian region.

It wants to project its soft power image in order to garner Afghan sympathy and political support in its strategic rivalry with Pakistan. India's strategy of winning the Afghan hearts and minds is aimed at countering Pakistan's undesirable influence over Afghanistan.

Another important objective for India is to counter non-state actors and deny them the opportunity to come closer to its border with Pakistan. India wants to address the challenge of Islamist extremism to secure the Kashmir valley from turbulence.

India's biggest challenge is to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for terrorists who could launch attacks against the country if the Taliban capture power in Kabul. During the 9th Heart of Asia conference in Tajikistan on 30 March 2021, India's foreign minister, S Jaishankar, underlined the problem of violence against civilians and the "continued involvement of foreign fighters" in Afghanistan.⁹

The Biden administration seems keen to reduce India-Pakistan rivalry which is often seen in the Western capitals as being a critical factor in exacerbating the Afghan turmoil.

China's Interests and Position

China's interest in Afghanistan lies in integrating the country into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing wants to enlarge the ambit of the Sino-Afghan trade.

Keen to have access to Afghanistan's mineral and other raw materials, it is trying to develop the necessary infrastructure for smooth transportation to China. Beijing has also invested in Afghan power generation projects.

China has been worried about the Afghan border with Tajikistan, and it has facilitated in setting up border outposts to protect its economic interests.

It has also reportedly helped the Afghan National Army build a counterterrorism mountain brigade in Badakhshan, a province bordering Xinjiang where Beijing has set up surveillance and detention facilities to suppress the Uyghur community.

⁸ Suhasini Haidar, 'India should make a move for peace, says Imran Khan', *The Hindu*, 17 March 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/peace-with-pakistan-will-give-india-direct-access-to-central-asia-says-imran-khan/article34091175.ece>.

⁹ Rezaul Laskar, 'India backs UN-led initiative for ceasefire in Afghanistan: Jaishankar', *Hindustan Times*, 30 March 2021. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-backs-un-led-initiative-for-ceasefire-in-afghanistan-jaishankar-101617098810055.html>.

China has been committed to countering radicalised Islamist militants that could affect the security of Xinjiang, which is a major logistics centre for the BRI and its gateway to Central Asia. The fact that the US is against the BRI makes China more hostile to Washington's human rights campaign on Xinjiang.¹⁰

Beijing has largely synchronised its position on the Afghan peace process with that of Pakistan. China shares Russian, Iranian and Pakistani aim of countering American influence in the region while amplifying its own.

Iran's Interests and Position

Afghanistan's security and stability are considered directly relevant to Iran's own. Since Iran has refrained from actions that may complicate the negotiation process, it is seen as an important player in the Afghan theatre.

Iran's view of the Taliban as a Sunni group and a foe has undergone a radical change over the years. Now it regards the Taliban as less dangerous than the ISIS which threatens Iranian interests. Iran has taken various steps that would frustrate the US strategy in Afghanistan. Common aims have played a role in forging ties between Iran and the Taliban as both have been against the permanent American military presence in Afghanistan and its neighborhood.

Like India, Iran has also perceived Afghanistan as a land bridge to Central Asia's natural resources.

Iran has emerged as a key trading partner of Afghanistan. The trade volume between the two neighbours is so high that the Trump administration was forced to allow for exemptions to enable the completion of the Chabahar port.¹¹ However, the exemption has also allowed New Delhi to continue developing the region that is seen vital for the Afghan economy.

Iranian interests in Afghanistan need to be considered if a durable and inclusive peace pact is to prevail in Afghanistan. And that is the main reason why Iran has been invited to the forthcoming UN-led conference.

Conclusion

All these countries will be discussing various issues pertaining to the resolution of the Afghan conflict in Turkey. They must agree that the US troop withdrawal in order to facilitate a political settlement be made conditional on a comprehensive ceasefire and

¹⁰ Abhishek G Bhaya, 'CGTN Interview: Is the West's Xinjiang campaign driven by U.S. plans to derail China's BRI?', *CGTN*, 24 March 2021. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-03-24/Is-the-West-s-Xinjiang-campaign-driven-by-U-S-plans-to-derail-BRI--YRHfzrqVYk/index.html>.

¹¹ PTI, 'US says Chabahar project won't be impacted by Iran sanctions', *The Economic Times*, 4 April 2021. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/us-decision-to-end-iran-oil-sanctions-waiver-wont-affect-indias-investments-in-chabahar-port/articleshow/69019491.cms>.

counterterrorism commitment. However, the Afghan conflict is a multifaceted one, with its primary actors being the Kabul government and the Taliban, and, hence, the primary responsibility of restoring peace and stability lies with them.

The unpalatable dimension of a new diplomatic push for peace-building is that all the key stakeholders agree that the Taliban can no longer be prevented from playing a critical role in shaping Afghan destiny. The Taliban are also aware of the fact that most of the regional players are trying to persuade the Kabul regime to share power with them. Nevertheless, the point here is to argue that while they have strikingly differing and divergent views of what Afghanistan should look like after the US exit, it is Afghanistan's internal stakeholders who hold the key to lasting peace. Hence, both Kabul and the Taliban must not spare any effort to make the peace process a success or they could risk extending the conflict.

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