

## **The Afghan Peace Process: Strategic Policy Contradictions and Lacunas**

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### **Abstract**

Stability in Afghanistan is inextricably linked with a negotiated peace settlement. Notwithstanding broad consensus about the essence of political negotiations to end the Afghan conundrum, internal and external stakeholders have been pursuing fluctuating strategies. The terminology of 'reconciliation' has often been viewed disparately by various actors. Consequently, the entire peace process in the country has remained shrouded in suspicion. This article aims at identifying the strategic policy discrepancies among the key national, regional and international players and suggests a workable way forward.

**Key words:** Afghanistan, Peace Process, Strategic Differences, U.S. Role, Taliban.

### **Introduction**

The Afghan War has entered into a state of strategic stalemate where none of the belligerents has been able to attain military victory in the conflict. More than one year into the drawdown of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops, violence in Afghanistan remains perpetual; revelation about the demise of Mullah Muhammad Omar has failed to decisively weaken the Taliban. Emergence of splinter groups among Afghan militants may further proliferate violence; such an eventuality will, unquestionably, impede the prospects of the peace process in Afghanistan. The resilience of the Taliban against the decade long military operations by NATO explicitly manifest the failure of the international community's Afghan strategy. The hallmark of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan has been ascendancy of the military option. Contrary to established norms, political means are only used to supplement the military strategy. Consequently, the political resolution of the Afghan issue through reintegration and reconciliation initiatives has mainly been pursued in line

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with the dictates of the armed campaign. Notwithstanding efforts at a negotiated settlement, the prospects of sustainable peace in the country through broad-based reconciliation (an initiative recognised as the foundation for lasting peace in Afghanistan) has, thus, remained elusive.

There have been serious flaws in the negotiated strategy of stakeholders that have undermined the entire Afghan peace process. Debilitated by internal political divisions and external pressures, the Afghan Government appears inadequately placed to pursue and lead a meaningful dialogue with the insurgent leadership. With waning global focus on the Afghan imbroglio, the conflicting interests of various external and internal players continue to undermine peaceful settlement of the issue. While the desire for a political resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan has often been mentioned by all stakeholders, the end game for each player varies with everyone aspiring for a win-win formula without conceding much. While Taliban consider themselves a government in exile, current dispensation at Kabul has been legitimised by the international community as well as the electoral process under the post-Taliban constitution. For Taliban, reconciliation means negotiations to regain what they lost to their opponents after the American invasion; while the government in Kabul is seeking to strengthen the existing dispensation, reduce violence and establish its writ all over the country.

The most perplexing issue vis-à-vis peace negotiations has been the inability of stakeholders in devising a pragmatic reconciliation strategy that addresses the key issues such as how to achieve consensus? What should be the minimal agreeable agenda? What should be the strategy to deal with the issue of preconditions for opening negotiations? Who should be at the helm of the negotiations: the United States, the United Nations, or the Kabul regime? What would be the role of regional countries? What can be conceded during talks? And finally, what end-condition is being looked at by various actors? Can a consensual end-condition be negotiated?

### **Historical Perspective on the Afghan Peace Process**

The growing strength and sway of Taliban in Afghanistan have led the international community to patronise various initiatives over the years aimed at discouraging the spread of insurgency. These efforts included programmes such as Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR 2003-2006), United Nations supported Afghanistan New Beginnings Programme (ANBP) and its successor the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG 2005). The Afghan Government launched the Strengthening Peace Programme in 2005 known as PTS, a few ad-hoc attempts at the local level were also undertaken by Afghan government officials and the British

Army at Musa Qala in Helmand province; and finally a more formal Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP).<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, all these peace initiatives have done little to stabilise Afghanistan and none could pursue any meaningful engagement for sustainable peace.

In 2010-2011, when the international forces had maximum combat power available against the Afghan insurgents, there was no articulated effort at initiating meaningful peace negotiations with the Taliban. It was assumed that the momentum of insurgency would be ceased by militarily conditioning Taliban field fighters while offering them monetary incentives that would consequently help in luring them away from combat. The subsequent phase envisaged talks with the senior leadership that would be weakened considerably by then and prepared to concede a great deal more at the negotiating table.

Formal efforts towards peace negotiations in Afghanistan gained currency in March 2009, when President Barack Obama proposed the notion of reaching out to moderate elements of the insurgency. At the end of 2009 when President Obama announced a military surge in Afghanistan, the insurgency had complete sway over the countryside, while simultaneously knocking at the door of major urban centres. Despite recognising the necessity of peace talks, the International Conference on Afghanistan on January 28, 2010 rejected the principle of negotiating with the insurgency leaders and instead proposed co-opting field fighters to weaken the insurgency.<sup>2</sup>

The remaining duration of the military surge did allow the Coalition Forces (CFs) to hunt down insurgent field commanders and fighters in the countryside through special operations and militarily condition the Taliban for a negotiated settlement. This was another opportune time for a broad-based and all-encompassing reconciliation push. But, as the situation stands now after the drawdown of the CFs, the Afghan insurgency is far from defeated. Security challenges are accentuating in the region with the emergence of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and the Afghan Defense Forces face serious capacity issues. In the prevailing environment, the prospects of a negotiated settlement through successful reconciliation between Afghan warring factions appear as remote as ever. The Taliban once again conceive victory, assume themselves talking from a point of

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Waldman, "Golden Surrender?" Discussion Paper 03, (Afghanistan Analysis Network, 2010), [http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/4792~v~Golden\\_Surrender\\_The\\_Risks\\_Challenges\\_and\\_Implications\\_of\\_Reintegration\\_in\\_Afghanistan.pdf](http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/4792~v~Golden_Surrender_The_Risks_Challenges_and_Implications_of_Reintegration_in_Afghanistan.pdf) (accessed April 5, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Tazreena Sajjad, *Peace at all Costs: Reintegration and Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, Issues Paper Series, (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2010), <http://www.areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/1035E-Peace%20at%20all%20Costs%20IP%202010%20web.pdf> (accessed April 5, 2016).

strength and least prepared to concede anything worthwhile at the negotiating table. The ensuing strategic stalemate in the Afghan conflict has, thus, largely undermined whatever peripheral military gains were achieved by the Coalition Forces (CFs) at the tactical or at best operational level.

### **Strategic Policy Contradictions and Lacunas Impacting the Afghan Peace Process**

The strategy of finding a negotiated settlement of the Afghan conflict has never been contested; nor the vitality of political means compared to the military option ever lost its appeal among policy-makers. The debate has always been on the modalities to be followed, the ultimate aim of the talks with insurgents, the end-condition sought, identification of suitable environments for talks and the role of various actors.

#### ***Reconciliation or Reintegration - An Ambiguous Strategy***

One of the major conceptual ambiguities that has been debated in all studies as well as papers on the Afghan peace process has been the theme of ‘Reconciliation’ and ‘Reintegration’:

In the words of former U.S. Secretary of Defense, Mr. Robert Gates: ‘Reintegration is really about getting the foot soldiers to decide that they don’t want to be a part of the Taliban anymore.’<sup>3</sup> According to the U.S. Army’s Field Manual 3-07, *Stability Operations*, participants ‘receive amnesty, re-enter civil society, gain sustainable employment, and become contributing members of the populace.’<sup>4</sup> The U.S. military’s joint doctrine on counterinsurgency operations states that ‘offering amnesty or a seemingly generous compromise can also cause divisions within an insurgency and present opportunities to split or weaken it.’<sup>5</sup> Correspondingly, General Stanley A. McChrystal in his review of the Afghan situation in August 2009, argued for a reintegration programme for ‘mid to low level insurgent fighters’ that would ‘offer eligible insurgents reasonable incentives to stop fighting and return to normalcy, possibly including the provision of employment or protection.’<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Waldman, “Golden Surrender?” 2.

<sup>4</sup> Headquarters, Department of U.S. Army, *Stability Operations*, Field Manual, no. 3-07, para 6-10, 2008, <http://fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-07.pdf> (accessed April 5, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Headquarters, Department of U.S. Army and United States Marine Corps, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, Field Manual, no. 3-24, 2014, <https://fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf> (accessed April 18, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Waldman, “Golden Surrender?” 2.

The UN has summarised the U.S. strategy of reintegration as an effort toward encouraging mid-level insurgents to cease attacks against international troops and civilians and in some cases to re-label their guns from Taliban to Afghan National Army (ANA) or Afghan National Police (ANP). According to a UN paper, the approach articulated in the McChrystal report allows insurgents the choice to ‘fight, flee or integrate’.<sup>7</sup>

Ostensibly, the U.S. Administration, despite being keen to vigorously pursue reintegration, has remained ambiguous and highly cautious regarding the question of reconciliation. There has been considerable reluctance within the administration about reconciliation as a whole, and whether or not to deal with insurgent leadership. There has also been a disagreement between the U.S. and NATO allies on the issue of reconciliation, with certain countries like the UK being more open to the idea of political negotiations and wanting to take it much further and possibly playing the role of a mediator.<sup>8</sup>

Afghan government officials have also recognised the reluctance of the U.S. to assume a unified position on reconciliation and expressed disagreement with the continuous effort to clinically disconnect the processes of reintegration and reconciliation. In one such example, Sebghatullah Sanjar, adviser to former President Hamid Karzai, expressed concern over this issue:

It is questionable why the United States just wants to reintegrate the low-level Taliban and not the leadership... That’s something they are concerned about, but from the Afghan side, we are trying to include everyone in negotiations.<sup>9</sup>

The process of a negotiated settlement of the Afghan issue has not only been proposed and supported by NATO/ISAF allies, it also gained UN backing. UN SC Resolution 1917 on March 22, 2010 renewed the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) for an additional year and,

...welcomed the efforts to promote dialogue with those elements...who are ready to renounce violence, break ties with Al-Qaeda...denounce terrorism and accept the Afghan constitution...and encourages the GIRoA<sup>10</sup> to make use of

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<sup>7</sup> Afghanistan Insurgent Network and the Reintegration Strategy, *UN Military Review*, May-June 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Sajjad, “Peace.”

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA).

UNAMA's good offices to support this process as appropriate.<sup>11</sup>

Regrettably though, an international institution like the UN also failed in taking a pragmatic assessment of the prevailing situation in Afghanistan before wholeheartedly announcing support of the U.S. backed reintegration and reconciliation initiative. The UN neither identified the impact of pre-conditions by the international community and the Afghan Government on talks, nor deliberated the prospects of a Taliban response on the demand of laying down arms without any worthwhile incentives.

Contrary to U.S. position on the peace process, the Afghan Government, many members of the international community and non-state local actors generally view reintegration as a bottom-up approach, focusing on the rank-and-file soldiers, while reconciliation was seen as a top-down political process, which involves dialogue with senior insurgency leadership.<sup>12</sup> In other words, 'Reconciliation' has been defined as a 'strategic level outreach to, and possible political accommodation with, the insurgent leadership,'<sup>13</sup> while the term 'Reintegration' is referred as the efforts aimed at providing incentives to insurgent fighters to include them to desist from fighting. Another aspect where the Afghan Government and international stakeholders have differed has been the sequencing as well as linkage between reintegration and reconciliation. The Afghan Government views both as a:

Two-pronged initiative, involving the cooption of rank-and-file soldiers within Afghan society (reintegration), while at the same time opening dialogue between the Afghan Government and key leaders associated with the insurgency.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, international actors generally classify reintegration and reconciliation as 'independent, rather than interrelated processes, anticipating a level of sequencing for them to be effective.'<sup>15</sup> The divergence of objectives intended through talks, especially among the Afghan and U.S. counterparts, has detrimentally influenced the prospects of consensus strategy on the way forward.

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<sup>11</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Security Council Extends Mandate of United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan to Help Promote Government-led Recovery Efforts*, SC 9889, March 22, 2010, United Nations, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2010/sc9889.doc.htm> (accessed April 5, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Sajjad, "Peace."

<sup>13</sup> Waldman, "Golden Surrender?" 2.

<sup>14</sup> Sajjad, "Peace," 26.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

### ***Fight and Talk - A Faulty U.S. Strategy***

There has been divergence of opinion between the U.S. administration and policy-makers over peace talks with the Taliban. The strategy to pursue a policy of ‘fight and talk’ simultaneously has been the preferred option of Pentagon since the U.S. military command wanted to weaken Taliban leadership prior to engaging in peace negotiations. Throughout the course of the Afghan conflict, American leadership and institutions could never be on the same page.

During the 2009 Afghanistan strategy reviews, those in favour of talking to the Taliban included Ambassador Richard Holbrooke and Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, who believed a settlement (with the Taliban) was the only way the conflict would end.<sup>16</sup>

Another view that decisively influenced the U.S. policy has been the opposite of what Ambassador Holbrooke and Ambassador Eikenberry considered:

Former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton was skeptical while CIA opposed any deal without a clear Taliban renunciation of Al-Qaeda.<sup>17</sup>

Besides, the U.S. military establishment had completely different view vis-à-vis negotiations with the Taliban:

Senior military leaders such as General Petraeus, along with Admiral Mike Mullen (then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) and General Stanley McChrystal (then Commander of ISAF), thought it was premature to explore talks with the Taliban before the Counter Insurgency (COIN) strategy was given a chance to work.<sup>18</sup>

This glaring divergence of opinion among American policy-makers on the preferred strategy in Afghanistan ultimately resulted in the adoption of a confused and hazy policy on Afghan peace process, considerably diminishing prospects of any worthwhile progress. It appears that the combination of talking and fighting, an approach that never emerged as a viable course of action to achieve peace, has mainly been employed due to the conflicting views amongst the U.S. Administration.

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<sup>16</sup> John Bew et al., *Talking to the Taliban: Hope over History?*, ICSR Report, New America Foundation, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ICSR-TT-Report.pdf> (accessed April 12, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

While formulating the reconciliation strategy, the American Administration seems to have assumed that since Taliban were a heterogeneous movement, many insurgent factions could be lured away from combat. The ideological facet was also disregarded while ‘persuading insurgents to lay down their arms, accept the constitution and integrate into the political process i.e. to change to the ‘good side’ and join the government, in return for some form of political reward under the headline of ‘power sharing.’<sup>19</sup> It was, hence, fairly assumed that the majority of field fighters had joined the insurgency not due to some ideological appeal, but for mere financial gains.

In the post-drawdown period, the U.S. has not only curtailed its military footprint for militarily coercing the Taliban to the negotiation table, but also reduced its influence on the Afghan ruling hierarchy as well. Apparently, the U.S. has minimalised credentials as the decisive factor in future peace discourse on Afghanistan. Regional players like China are now on course to assume an enhanced role. However, continued American presence in Afghanistan and financial support of the Kabul regime allows the U.S. to retain adequate clout over all Afghan conflict resolution initiatives.

Another point that has been discussed before is the serious lack of any effort to initiate an all-encompassing broad-based negotiation. The impression selected reconciliation efforts give is that their primary motivation is dividing and weakening the insurgency by engaging with only a few groups. No policy parameters are suggested to deal with Taliban-affiliated organisations like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and the Haqqani Network (HQN). Though the external militant outfits based in Afghanistan may not have much influence, however, they have always retained the potential to act as spoilers.

### ***Taliban’s Posture - Ambitious Expectations***

The Taliban have not been keen and willing to concede much during negotiations. There has apparently been no effort aimed at engaging in meaningful talks with the insurgents for deliberating their demands. Until now, the Taliban seem immovable with regard to at least a symbolic gesture towards the withdrawal of foreign troops as a precondition for the opening of any serious negotiations.<sup>20</sup> The revelation of Mullah Omar’s death by

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Ruttig, *The Other Side*, Thematic Report 01, Afghanistan Analysis Network, [aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=114](http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=114) (accessed April 15, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *Negotiating with the Taliban: Issues and Prospects*, The Century Foundation, <https://tcf.org/assets/downloads/tcf-Giustozzi.pdf> (accessed April 15, 2015).



Kabul a few days prior to the second round of the Murree Process further constricted the space for pro-negotiation with the Taliban leaders. Taliban's response to peace negotiations is briefly discussed below:

Taliban's resilience against the onslaught of the most powerful military alliance in the contemporary world has endorsed their status as genuine stakeholders in Afghan affairs. Besides the exit of foreign troops, the Taliban also want recognition as legitimate stakeholders. To that end, removal of the label of 'terrorist', arrangements of power sharing mechanism and removal from the UN sanction list are some of their understandable demands.

Future peace negotiations in Afghanistan are likely to take place in an environment where Afghan government and its international benefactors will have to confront a Taliban leadership which would be carrying the notion of victory. Afghan constitution, implemented after the fall of the Taliban regime has also been a contentious issue for the anti-Kabul government forces:

Taliban do not appear likely to accept the current Afghan constitution, even in a revised form and would demand a greater role for Islamic law in legislation, and a consequent Islamization of the judiciary.<sup>21</sup>

Another important aspect largely ignored while pursuing peace negotiations has been acknowledging the incapacity of the Taliban leadership to concede much from their maximalist position owing to the character of the insurgent movement. A notion of weakness on the part of the leadership would never be appreciated by the rank and file of the insurgency and the movement would risk the prospects of disintegration.

Thus, the U.S. narrative of portraying a win-win situation, internationally and for the domestic audience, is least likely to be accepted by the insurgent leadership. Moreover, Taliban's stance on peace negotiations is likely to be hardened with the prospects of the emergence of ISIS; an alternative for the obstinate elements within the movement. Moreover, the division amongst the Taliban amid revelations of Mullah Muhammad Omar's death has undoubtedly strengthened 'hawks' within their leadership. It would not be possible for the new leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour to show weakness during negotiations when his authority is already in question within the movement. Notwithstanding his reputation as a pro-negotiation leader, Mansour has to display a harder posture to appease his rank and file.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 24.

At this time, it is also important to remain cognizant that the incumbent Taliban leadership compared to its emerging generation is considered to be mature and pragmatic; thus, presumably more amenable to peace talks. The growing sway of young Taliban who are more radical and averse to political accommodation may put off the reconciliation process for an indefinite period.

### ***Regional Involvement – A Whimsical Endeavour***

While American policy-makers acknowledge centrality of a regional framework for a sustainable peace process in Afghanistan, virtually, it has not received any emphasis beyond mere lip service. The major impediments in developing regional consensus on a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan are outlined below:

The inevitability of regional involvement was identified in the 2009 U.S. policy review on Afghanistan; however, there has not been any serious effort at developing consensus with Afghanistan's immediate and distant neighbours on the way forward. Consequently, with the drawdown of ISAF, regional countries are bracing themselves for future uncertainties vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Regional re-alignments have been taking place to fill the emerging power vacuum in Afghanistan after the drawdown, but prospects of any broad agreement among these countries seems improbable at this stage.

Pakistan, the most affected state due to Afghan instability, has strongly favoured a broad-based reconciliation among all Afghan domestic stakeholders. Islamabad, though viewed suspiciously, has been facilitating reconciliation unconditionally.

Iran has not denounced reconciliation with Taliban, but would endeavour to preserve its own interests in Afghanistan, as well as of its Tajik and Hazara allies. Iran also wants a friendly dispensation in Afghanistan and limited Taliban influence to pursue its future economic agenda in the region. Similarly, China too, looks at Afghanistan through the prism of economic interests, but remains wary of the spillover of Islamic militancy from Afghanistan to its Xinjiang/Uygur region. China does not oppose reconciliation, but would not support a regime in Afghanistan that fuels extremism and endangers Chinese economic interests and investments.

India has benefitted enormously since U.S. involvement in Afghanistan has raised its clout significantly in the country through financial aid and military training, and thus, expects to play a dominant role. Since India sees Taliban as Pakistan's proxy, it does not want a

leading role of Taliban in future arrangements, therefore, is least supportive of reconciliation.

Like Iran, Russia is also concerned about the spillover of militancy (and narcotics) to Central Asian states, but has never viewed a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan favourably. Central Asian oligarchies view the Afghan conflict with disquiet and feel threatened due to Islamic militancy in Afghanistan.

It is clear from the above, that Iran, India and Russia who erstwhile supported the Northern Alliance during Afghan civil war, now have convergence of opinion on Afghanistan. These countries, thus, have the potential to act as spoilers if not meaningfully engaged while pursuing reconciliation.

### ***The Afghan Domestic Environment – A Key Impediment***

Reconciliation in Afghanistan can only succeed when the domestic environment of the country is adequately shaped for the initiative. Some of the key domestic issues hitherto impacting the peace process are:

#### ***Intra-Afghan Dialogue – Least Priority***

‘Afghan Reconciliation’, as understood and pursued, has remained confined towards ending violence by bringing the insurgents on the negotiating table with the Kabul government and U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). There has not been any serious effort or strategy to initiate a broad-based reconciliation process among various fragmented segments of Afghan society to ensure sustainable peace in the country. The politico-ethnic rivalry in Afghanistan which has been a major source of the post 9/11 civil war still persists and can seriously threaten the Afghan social fabric unless addressed while pursuing a political settlement. Barring a few disjointed track II initiatives by nongovernmental setups outside Afghanistan, there has not been any articulated endeavour towards promoting greater intra-Afghan dialogue. The reconciliation process in Afghanistan can be sustainable only when it has wholehearted support of all Afghan ethnicities; to that end, the initiative has to be entirely ‘Afghanised’. Since the Taliban primarily represent radical Pashtun militia that fought against Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara communities during the civil war of the 90s, the consent of non-Pashtuns on the negotiated settlement is essential.

### *High Peace Council (HPC) – Capacity Problems*

With peace negotiations emerging as a cornerstone of the Afghan strategy, ‘Afghanising’ the process was considered essential for legitimising as well as ensuring acceptance of the initiative among the Afghans. Consequently, establishment of the HPC was approved in June 2010 by the *Loya Jirga* (traditional National Council for Peace) to pursue reconciliation with the Taliban. The HPC has however, failed to achieve any breakthrough in reconciliation with the insurgents, rather in the process, its inaugural Chairperson Burhanuddin Rabbani (former Afghan President) and a senior member Arsala Rehmani Daulat were allegedly assassinated by the Taliban. It is now fair to assume that the HPC did not have the capacity at any stage to pursue meaningful dialogue with the Taliban or significantly contribute to a negotiated settlement of the Afghan conundrum. The Government’s control and composition of the HPC have been identified as the real snags that incapacitated the latter from undertaking any consequential leap towards reconciliation. Most of the Council members have been the leaders of Jihadi groups and commanders who have a record of fighting against one another and a majority of them have fought the Taliban.<sup>22</sup> It was, thus, naïve to presume that the Taliban would accept any mechanism of negotiations via an incapacitated and government-controlled HPC.

### *Afghan Ruling Elite - Interests and Incapacities*

The Afghan ruling coterie, that has benefitted enormously during the war in Afghanistan, fears losing their clout with a significant reconciliation and, thus, may sabotage any meaningful progress towards the peace process. Unless the international community asserts its influence and links continuation of engagement in Afghanistan and uninterrupted financial aid with negotiated settlement of the issue, Afghan ruling class would be least willing for result-oriented talks. The pronouncement of an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliation process seems to have been overtaken up till now by Afghan interest groups to protect their gains. The Government has been pretending keenness towards reconciliation with insurgents; nonetheless, Afghan dispensation seems to be expecting Pakistan to ‘deliver’ the Taliban for a negotiated settlement without getting engaged in a serious ‘give and take’ process.

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<sup>22</sup> Hussain Saramad and Temur Beg, “Negotiation with Insurgents in the Afghan Print Media,” *Afghanistan Watch* April 2012.”

### *Lacking an Institutional Framework*

The Afghan reconciliation has been a disjointed process involving numerous mechanisms and several actors undertaking parallel activities without any coordination. The conflicting interests of various actors pursuing talks with the Taliban, absence of agreed incentives for the insurgents, and domestic compulsions of major players like the U.S. have not allowed a consensual institutional framework to evolve. Moreover, the tendency of various interlocutors to keep things close to their heart (either to prevent premature disclosure before making some headway or for some vested interests) has also not helped the cause. Numerous parallel initiatives without any articulated offer for the insurgents has, thus, been conveying an impression of non-seriousness and has failed to attract a Taliban response.

### **The Way Forward**

The perpetual violence in Afghanistan is a reflection of the strategic stalemate in the conflict; moreover, it also indicates failure of the military option in defeating the Taliban. Unfortunately, political solutions have primarily been employed during the Afghan conflict to compliment the military strategy, mostly aimed at dividing and ultimately weakening the Taliban. With Afghan insurgency as resilient as ever and the drivers of conflict continuously expanding, greater sincerity and accommodation by all stakeholders is imperative for a peaceful resolution of the issue. While the Taliban, despite assuming victory, are not in a position to have sway over the whole of Afghanistan, the Afghan Security Forces also lack the capacity to defeat them. Since no side is actually winning this conflict through force, a strategy of decisive gains at the negotiation table or by employing pre-conditions is unlikely to accrue desired results. A probable way forward in order to make the Afghan reconciliation process a success is enunciated below:

There has not been any serious endeavour to favourably shape the environment for peace talks in Afghanistan; the policies of allegations and counter allegations, scapegoating and pre-conditioning has been seriously undermining the peace process. The foremost priority should be the immediate cessation of conflict, even on temporary basis. The Taliban may not be forthcoming and political expediency is likely to prevent Kabul and its Western supporters from undertaking such an initiative, however, the desire for peace must not be considered a sign of weakness by either side. Giving peace a fair chance is the greater responsibility of those who have more to lose compared to the insurgents. Consequently, the strategy of 'fight and talk' may need to be abandoned to remove the existing trust

deficit. It would be helpful if under a ceasefire, some Taliban commanders return to Afghanistan to ‘Afghanise’ the negotiation process.<sup>23</sup> We cannot be assured of a positive response from the Taliban, nevertheless, it would offer the peace process a fair chance while also reducing the insurgent’s public appeal to some extent.

The Afghan conflict is predominantly linked with a serious, honest and meaningful negotiation process with the insurgents, it is, therefore, imperative that they be pursued towards a political engagement. A ‘pull factor’ has to be created by the Afghan government and the U.S. by ‘incentivising’ the negotiations. Hitherto, nothing worthwhile has been offered to lure the Taliban away from violence. Without incentives, successful peace talks will remain elusive. The policy of selected engagement with insurgents is also not viable and is unlikely to help in bringing sustainable peace and stability in Afghanistan. The U.S. has not been very receptive to the idea of an all-inclusive dialogue process, especially with the Haqqani Network (HQN), however, Haqqanis are increasingly co-opted by the post-Mullah Omar Taliban. The focus should be on dispelling the impression of dividing or weakening the insurgency through talks.

The Afghan peace process also continues to be marred with improbable expectations. The narrative of maximalist gains through negotiations has apparently been a motive of the antagonists. While the Taliban have not been militarily defeated, the expectations that they would be forced to concede during parleys appears irrational. Alternatively, the government in Kabul can continue to hold its ground with international support, precluding the prospects of Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan. Success of the peace process is, thus, increasingly linked with a more accommodative approach from both sides with each preparing to concede from existing inflexible postures. Moreover, the Afghan insurgency has carried ideological flavour and inspired the masses on religious basis; consequently, material offers to wean some groups away from the battlefield may not succeed.

The perpetual violence in Afghanistan cannot solely be attributed to external factors and influences. Afghan society has historically comprised of diverse ethnic groups with varying interests; a state of conflict has, thus, always prevailed in the country. Over the years, external players have exacerbated the everpresent ethnic fault lines in Afghan society. While removing the prevailing trust deficit among conflicting domestic players may not be conceivable right away, a semblance of reconciliation within Afghanistan is crucial. There needs to be reconciliation between the central

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<sup>23</sup> Ruttig, “The Other Side.”

government and several of its local representatives on the one hand and the many alienated groups in the local populations on the other.<sup>24</sup> It is essential that besides initiating a negotiation process between the Taliban, the government and the foreign military forces present on Afghan soil, a comprehensive intra-Afghan dialogue is encouraged.

While Afghanistan's war economy has resulted in the emergence of various interest groups, their sway over rival camps and potential to act as 'spoilers' during the peace process, is a serious challenge. There is a greater need to identify these 'spoilers' in the ranks of the Afghan government as well as the Taliban and isolate them at the outset to make the reconciliation process meaningful. It is pertinent to mention that the 'spoilers' are often patronised by external players and these proxies become activated at their behest.

Conflict resolution has emerged as an 'expert's domain' in the international arena, warranting an institutional mechanism with the involvement of globally reputed specialists on the subject. In case of Afghanistan, employment of an institutional mechanism for conflict resolution has merely received lip service, promoting a strange concept of 'fight and talk' among rivals. Consequently, Afghan 'conflict resolution' efforts can at best be declared as initiatives of 'conflict management'. There may be a requirement to identify and employ an institutionalised 'conflict resolution mechanism' in Afghanistan through some international body. The UN, in close cooperation with either a group of its Islamic member-states or in the shape of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), could be suitable facilitators for talks.<sup>25</sup>

Afghanistan's internal environment cannot be isolated from the developments transpiring in its immediate vicinity. The country has long been a battleground of conflicting interests of regional players, a trend unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. These regional actors' preferences and bottom-line priorities, including their views about negotiating with the Taliban, must be both managed and addressed so as to enable a sustainable political settlement.<sup>26</sup> This is only possible when an undisputed acceptable arbitrator mediates the entire process.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Chorev Matan and Sherman Jake, *The Prospects for Security and Political Reconciliation in Afghanistan: Local, National, and Regional Perspectives*, A Workshop Report, 2010, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and Institute for Global Leadership, <http://cic.es.its.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/prospects-security.pdf> (accessed April 18, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

The peace and stability of Afghanistan, in particular, and of the immediate region, in general, has entered a crucial phase. With drivers of conflict ever-expanding, the prospects of a negotiated settlement are rather delicately poised. The drawdown of the international combat forces has coincided with the emergence of a new challenge in the shape of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the region, particularly bordering areas of Afghanistan. While the emergence of the ISIS can be termed as a serious security challenge, it has also provided an alternative to those Afghan insurgents who may be more hawkish and least amenable to reconciliation. The Afghan Taliban have never been a monolithic organisation, however, Mullah Omar's presence as the supreme leader kept the internal frictions of the insurgent groups under firm control. With his demise, the internal dissension among the Taliban movement has become more pronounced, prompting the incumbent leadership to adopt a relatively hardline posture. It may now be well beyond the power of Mullah Akhtar Mansour to concede substantially during peace parleys as any such concession may further erode his legitimacy and acceptance among the movement's rank and file. On the other hand, the Afghan government and the U.S. may opt to further fractionalise and weaken the insurgency through pre-conditioning the peace talks and accentuating the existing fault lines amongst the Taliban. In both scenarios, peace would be the ultimate loser and the sufferings of the Afghan populace may continue indefinitely. ■