
**RECONCILIATION PROCESS IN AFGHANISTAN
AND PAKISTAN AS CARDINAL PLAYER**

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ABSTRACT

Afghanistan is in state of war for almost 40 long years but the political dynamics got changed after 9/11. Since the war on terror started facets of peace talks launched without meaningful end. The reconciliation process in Afghanistan had immediately started after establishment of Afghan interim government in 2001. Till 2016 mid, four different reconciliation /reintegration processes were launched by the USA and Hamid Karzai government with Afghan Taliban. The new elected president Ashraf Ghani ended all such processes in 2016 but showed willingness again in 2018 for direct peace talks between USA and Taliban clerics. In the current political scenario, Afghan reconciliation process is back on track with direct peace talks between USA, Taliban and Afghan Government along other international actors. However, Taliban were not ready to sit with the Afghan Government and this is where the Pakistan played as key to Afghan peace process. The focus of this research article is to find the challenges and opportunities of this peace process; Pakistan's role as cardinal player can consolidate the peace process in Afghanistan. Furthermore, this research will give future recommendations for the peace process in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Reconciliation, Afghanistan, USA, Taliban, Pakistan, Regional Actors

INTRODUCTION

Reconciliation and reintegration are core elements for peace building in a war wrecked country like Afghanistan. Afghanistan is in state of war for almost four long decades. Afghanistan is country whose geographical and strategic importance cannot be denied. It is on one hand the door to Central Asia on other hand it is a vital link, which connects Subcontinent to Iran, and from north to south, it connects the central Asian Republics. Afghanistan is area-wise 40th largest country of the world. She has 34 provinces with a population of 28.6 million

with around 1 million Afghans living in Pakistan as refugees (L.Lee, 2018). The history of Afghanistan is full of wars and bloodshed, however she is in continuous state of war since 1979. Afghanistan saw its first National Reconciliation Policy (NRP) from 1986 until 1992 by the President of Afghanistan Dr.Najibullah. It failed due to the outbreak of civil war during 1992 after the resignation of Dr.Najibullah in April 1992 (Najibullah, 2017:4). The ongoing Afghanistan peace process was started just after the establishment of Afghan government as a result of the “Bonn Agreement” which was signed on 5 Dec 2001, since then the Afghan peace process has been ongoing (for almost 18 years) without having any significant results. The Afghan Government has used several diverse strategies aimed at making peace with Taliban, mostly designed to make Taliban agree to give up their military campaign (Kaura, 2018).

According to Robert Crews of Stanford University, between 2001 and 2007, “no clear legal or political guidelines” were offered to differentiate between “moderates” and “extremists” when it came to reconciliation or reintegration agenda with respect to the neo-Taliban in Afghanistan (Robert, 2008). The Afghan Government under President Hamid Karzai in 2010 initiated a High Peace Council (HPC) and offered Taliban a peace deal which include disconnection of Taliban from Al Qaida, abandoned all kind of violence, and pursuance of political goals under the Afghan constitution. The Taliban rejected the Karzai offer and responded with increase in violence and attacks against afghan and allied forces.

On 7th June 2018, the Afghan Government announced a one-sided week-long nationwide ceasefire with the Taliban. Two days later the Taliban responded with a three-days cease fire (Thomas, 2018). Further, for peace initiatives the US diplomats under the US special envoy to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad also met with the Taliban and peace talks were held at Doha in 2019 and it was close to deal between US and Taliban, but the brutal car bomb attack in which 12 persons were murdered, the US President called off the peace talks (*New York Times*, 2019).

In 2018 the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) pronounced Afghanistan the most lethal conflict in the world for battle-related deaths. Their casualty data for 2019 shows Afghanistan maintaining that position. Fatalities in August in

Afghanistan are three times higher than either Syria or Yemen, according to ACLED data. In June 2019, Afghanistan was named the least peaceful place in the world by the Global Peace Index report (www.humanity.org).

However, it's the time that Taliban and afghan governments resumes the talks directly as two major stakeholder. Dr.Abdullah Abdullah after signing power-sharing deal with Ashraf Ghani, is now leading the Peace Council and peace talks with Taliban as chairman of High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) (Aljazeera, 2020). The Afghan Government has also released 5000 Taliban prisoners including 400 high valued prisoners as a result of US-Taliban deal to start direct intra-Afghan talks between Taliban and Afghan Governments (*Washington Post*, 2020). Pakistan is also playing her positive role for the Afghan peace and bringing the Taliban and Afghan Government on table. The peaceful Afghanistan is in favor of all the direct and indirect stake holders, international community and the regional powers and all should work together with the consent of Afghan Government for everlasting peace in the Afghanistan.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this research paper context analysis examines the political, military, societal dimensions that are necessarily required for the reconciliation process of Afghanistan. In the situation of long continued Afghan war Reconciliation Theory has been adopted as theoretical framework. In this framework, most pronounced illustration by the theorist and practitioner John Paul Lederach, contents that the key to conflict resolution is long term peace building and conciliation efforts (Paul, 2005). It proposes that mediators should encourage sustained dialogue/improved connections and confidence between relevant groups. Authorities have raised suspicions over the process of reconciliation about hostility between factions. Notwithstanding, the advocates of above approach argue that instead of waiting for the break-through in negotiations the focus should be on the continuity of negotiation in long term process of change (John Darby and Roger M.Ginty, 2008).

Due to the four decades long war in Afghanistan, the chaotic and violent situation have brought a disintegrated and factionalized society. The conflict between the government, its allies (internal and

foreign), different ethnic and religious groups and warlords is not the only dimension of reconciliation. Many ethnic, religious and other factions are engaged in never ending conflict over the power and resources. There are so many groups and individuals have suffered from the human rights violations and war crimes. The wide spread corruption of the Government at center, weak rule of law, ethnic discrimination, absence of merit-based system and increasing poverty is yet another dimension of the conflict.

Conceptually, reconciliation is not a synonym for talks with Taliban rather it's just one part of reconciliation. Reconciliation is a broad process that addresses the conflict at all levels. It must contribute in the reintegration, rehabilitation process and healing of all societal wounds of the society over generations. As the theory suggests, the political leadership combined with leadership of civil society can play their role with the support of figures who holds prominent space like Ulema and tribal leaders/elders (without any formal authority) in fostering and facilitating reconciliation. According to Lederach, reconciliation is central to conflict resolution in deeply divided societies and should be understood as a process of relationship building between antagonists (Paul, 2008:149-152).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- Historical, Critical and Analytical approaches has been used during the course of research
- This is a qualitative research in nature. Therefore facts, ideas and historical references has been investigated and analyzed from secondary sources.

TALIBAN AND AL-QAEDA UPRISING IN AFGHANISTAN

The world saw the uprising of Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union troops in early 1980, which brought almost 20000 jihadists from all over the world with the military and financial support of USA, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan (Chaliand & Arnaud, 2007:293). At the end of Afghan Jihad, the mujahideen took over the Kabul in April 1992 by overthrowing the Najibullah Ahmadzai, then the President of Afghanistan. The mujahideen failed to run the government being fragmented along ethnic, tribal, sectarian and personality clashes.

In this anarchy, few Pashtun Talibs (those who seek religious knowledge) arose from madrassah and seized the control over Spin

Boldak on 10th October. In a month time they also seized the control of Kandahar Province. In September 1996, the Taliban gained the control of the Kabul and proclaimed it as the Islamic Emirate. The Taliban commander Mullah Omer titled himself as Amer-al-Mominin (commander of the faithful) and started ruling the Afghanistan.

The Taliban committed serious human rights violations and killed hundreds of innocent civilians specially Hazaras who according to them were not Muslims. As per human right watch 2001, during the capture of Mazar-e-Shareef in August 1998, almost 2000 civilians most of whom were Hazaras and during the capture of Bamian in 2000, more than 170 Hazaras men were killed in just four days. Taliban applied their own stark version of Sharia in Afghanistan (Rashid, 2000:69, 85).

The Afghanistan under the rule of Taliban became safe haven for Islamic jihadist and Al-Qaeda joined hands with Taliban and portrayed Afghanistan as a strong hold of Muslims against the West. Following the call for jihad by Osama Bin Laden, then the Al-Qaeda chief residing in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda members exploded the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998. The US targeted the Al-Qaeda training centers in Afghanistan and demanded Taliban government to hand over Osama Bin Laden to them but Taliban refused (Zaeef, 2010:131).

The event of 9/11 attacks in which almost 3000 people were killed from various countries. The US government immediately identified Al-Qaeda as responsible for it and Osama Bin Laden as prime suspect. The US president George W. Bush immediately insisted that the Taliban should handover Osama Bin Laden and close the Al-Qaeda nurseries/ training camps which was bluntly refused by Mullah Omer. As a result, US launched “Operation Enduring Freedom” on 7th October 2001 and Taliban government ended on 9 December 2001.

PEACE PROCESS AND TALIBAN

The Afghanistan peace process has been ongoing for last almost 18 years without any significant results. The Afghan government has tried number of strategies with the aim to convince the Taliban on making peace and quitting the military campaign (Kaura, 2018:5). President Hamid Karzai declared a general amnesty for all the Taliban on 22 Dec 2001 except the criminal elements. In April 2003, he also

announced the Taliban as son of soil to differentiate between the Taliban and criminals (Tarzi, 2009:278-279 & Tellis, 2009:5-6).

Karzai government made a National Consultative Peace Loya Jirga in 2010, followed by High Peace Council under Burhanuddin Rabbani conducting peace talks with the Taliban. Burhanuddin Rabbani was killed by Taliban in 2011 (Kaura, 2018:6). The Afghan Government under President Hamid Karzai in June 2010 initiated the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) with two organs. (i) High Peace Council (HPC) to negotiate with senior opposition leaders and for implementation of the program, and (ii) Provincial Peace and Reintegration Councils (PPRC) to work for integration of insurgents and opposition/Taliban want to quit violence at community level (Najibullah, 2017:138). Taliban opened their office bearing their flag in Doha, Qatar but was closed within 24 hours in June 2013.

Karzai offered Taliban a peace deal which include disconnection of Taliban from Al Qaida, abandoned all kind of violence, and pursuance of political goals under the Afghan constitution. The Taliban rejected the Karzai offer, responded with increase in violence and attacks against afghan, and allied forces. In 2014 Afghan government tried to move further on the path of reconciliation by approaching neighboring countries specially Pakistan in order to reach Taliban for peace talks (Najibullah, 2017:139).

The Doha office of Taliban was accepted by the National Unity Government under the President Ashraf Ghani and conducted several talks with Taliban representatives. On September 22, 2016 President Ashraf Ghani signed a Peace Deal with the Gulbaddin Hematyars's Hezb-e-Islami showing that Afghan government is honest in peace talks. The Peace agreement gave immunity to Hizb-e-Islami ranks and files for their past actions (Zaki, 2018:7, 13). Ashraf Ghani at 2nd Kabul peace conference had made an offer to Taliban that include the recognition of Taliban as political entity, revival of constitution, release of Taliban prisoners and removal of sanctions from Taliban in February 2018. The president Ghani repeated his bold peace offers again at Tashkent, Uzbekistan in a conference during march 2018 (Thomas, 2018). The Taliban throughout all the peace processes remained stagnant with believe that the afghan government as not legitimate partner on the issue of regarding peace. As per Taliban, afghan government as puppet of US, therefore, they always insisted on

direct negotiations with US. (Kaura, 2018:10). Taliban attended a peace conference in Moscow with the participation of ten countries including Iran, India, Pakistan and central Asian republics on 9th November 2108 without any representation of Afghan government, but the High Peace Conference in their personal capacity (*Washington Post*, 2019).

Recently, USA directly conducted peace talks with Taliban Doha Qatar. The Taliban delegation was headed by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Zalmay Khalilzad as a US special envoy for Afghan peace talk for continuous 8 months. President Donald Trump suddenly stopped all kind of peace talks on 7th September 2019 because of the continuous attacks on American forces in Afghanistan. However, US and Afghan Taliban has signed a peace deal finally on 29th February 2020, according to which the US has to reduce their forces gradually and Taliban will start direct peace talks with Afghan government. The Afghan Government has already released 5000 Taliban prisoners including 400 high valued prisoners involved in grievous crimes. Taliban has also announced 21 members negotiating team which will be headed by Mawlawi Abdul Hakim who is head of the judicial system of Taliban controlled areas of Afghanistan.

ROLE OF REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS

The role of regional and international players always remained vital since the time of Afghan jihad against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Since 9/11 the role and influence of the regional and international players has increased many folds. The Afghanistan has become multi-dimensional involving regional and international players. This involvement has added to the complexity of situation in Afghanistan because of regional countries rivalry and Afghanistan has become the proxy arena of war for regional and international players. Therefore, no single player may hold key position to resolve the Afghan issue and therefore, the concern and interests of all the players should be taken into consideration.

Role of India: India although do not share her immediate border with Afghanistan but both the countries share common interests rooted back to post India's independence and partition. It was only the India who accepted the government of Communist People Democratic Party of Afghanistan and the soviet military and provide every kind of aid (humanitarian and technical) to president Najib Ullah's Afghanistan

(*New York Times*, March 1989). The collapse of Najib Ullah Government followed by civil war limited the Indian influence in Afghanistan with very limited presence on ground (Ganguly, 2012). The emergence of Taliban regime in 1996 and Taliban close relations with Pakistan left India worse off than ever. That was the time that India got close to the northern Alliance of Ahmed Shah Masood in opposition of Taliban (Yakolev, 2001).

After the incident of 9/11, the Taliban government was thrown over and President Hamid Karzai came into power as mandated under the Bonn agreement of 2001. This accelerated the India's relations with the Afghan government once again. During October 2011 Hamid Karzai signed a strategic partnership agreement with India. This was the first of the it's kind of strategic partnership which the government of Kabul had signed with any country (James, 2011). Under this agreement India agreed to train the Afghan National Army and agreed to assist Afghanistan in every possible way by investing billions of dollars. India today is the fifth largest aid donor to Afghanistan. She has accomplished much interims of assistance including infrastructure, health and education.

Today Indian approach towards Afghanistan is basically a function of its Pakistan policy. India historically proved that she wants to prevent Pakistan from dominating Afghanistan. This is the reason India always opposed the Taliban and their involvement in politics of Afghanistan. However, India has recently adopted a softer stance towards Taliban as she has understood the geo political reality that Taliban has the control over half of the territory of Afghanistan (Shome, 2019).

Role of China: Afghanistan is geographically a gateway to the Central Asian region so it becomes a gateway to the oil rich Central Asian Republics (CARs). China is an evolving super power which economy demands exploration of energy resources, gas and hydro carbon resources of CARs. Afghanistan acts like a bridge to enter CARs. The building of CEPEC project is also connected to China wish for approach to CARs and Afghanistan is the main link between CARs and CEPEC. Furthermore, Central Asia is crucial for China because of its energy reserves but also because other major powers such as Russia, USA and India have already started competing for influence in the region. Afghanistan National Security Advisor Hameed Ullah

Mohib meet with Chinese foreign minister on 10th January 2019. Meanwhile, China has also engaged Taliban as well by conducting peace talks to see its interests in Afghanistan (Bukhari, 2019).

Role of Iran: Iran shares its physical border of 921 km with Afghanistan and historical links. Iran is playing a pivotal role in Afghanistan since 2001 by direct investment for assistance in critical national infrastructure, communication infrastructure, energy supplies and agricultural development. She has also religious links with millions of Afghan Shia Hazaras, which resides in center and northern areas of Afghanistan. Due to these positive connections, Iran is viewed as a potential stabilizing force in the reconciliation process of Afghanistan. Iran has proved herself as a cordial economic life line for Afghanistan. In 2018, Iran become the biggest trade partner of Kabul.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates accused Iran for double game in Afghanistan (*Time Magazine*, October 2009). However, Tehran largely avoid from engaging and such reprehensible activities as Afghanistan security is directly relevant to Iran's own. In 2018 Iran shifted its covered support for Taliban to overt and started publicizing its relationship with Taliban as imported player of Afghan politics (*Washington Post*, 2019).

During a conversation between the authors and Ali Raza Bikdeli in October 2019, (an Ex ambassador of Iran to Russia, CARS and different countries since 1986 till 2016 and presently working as Head and senior researcher and fellow at The Institute for Political and International Studies Tehran) expressed his views that Iran foreign policy towards its neighbors is based on the Islamic principal of "neighbor and neighborhood" and that's the reason they are supporting the Afghan national building process by all-out effort and also helping Afghan government in reconciliation and peace process.

Role of US: In 1979 with the invasion of soviet forces at Afghanistan the US started its cold war against the USSR with the help of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Mujahideen's from all over the world flew towards Afghanistan under the religious umbrella of Jihad Revival. After the withdrawal of soviet forces from Afghanistan then the Mujahideen were left at their own without any rehabilitation. This forced Afghanistan into turmoil and civil war. In 1996, the emergence of Taliban government at Afghanistan provided safe heavens to Islamic hard liners and Al-Qaeda. The 9/11terrorist attacks and

Taliban denial for handing over the Osama Bin Laden as prime suspect forced the US and allied forces to start war against Afghanistan.

The US has taken the leading role in the overall re-construction of war-torn country by building the Afghan National Security Force, road infrastructure, educational institutions and government. Both the US and Afghanistan signed a strategic partnership agreement committing for a long-term relationship in 2005 (Joint Declaration, 2005). After 19 years of long war now it is the time that US is struggling for the endgame to war in Afghanistan. Since 2010 the US is trying for reconciliation / peace process in Afghanistan. Recently US conducted direct peace talks with Taliban at Doha Qatar to find peaceful solution to Afghanistan's long running war. However, the US president Trump called off peace negotiations with Taliban after an attack on the US soldiers on 5 September 19 (BBC News, 2019).

As per Brigadier General Donald C Bolduc Retired, a former commander of US Special Operation Command, today the Taliban's control as much terrain as they ever have controlling since the conflict begin. The America has paid 5.9 trillion dollars according to Brown University's Cost of war Projects. US is now seeking Pakistan's help in the Afghan peace process and also accepted Pakistan as cardinal player. The peace deal between US and Afghan Taliban has already been signed on February 29, 2020 and as a confidence building measures as per the deal Afghan government has released 5000 Taliban from the different prisons. The US president has also announced reduction of US troops to 8600 to fulfill the peace agreement which will be subsequently reduced to full withdrawal before May 2021 as per the Agreement. Trump administration was quite serious in this before the US election as they have promised the US citizens. The recent victory of Joe Biaden in presidential elections of USA has stalled the ongoing peace talks (Lawrence, 2021)

ROLE OF PAKISTAN AS CARDINAL PLAYER

Pakistan and Afghanistan share the longest physical border of about 2430 km known as Durand line. The historic, social and religious ties between both the countries are even more than centuries old. However, Afghanistan was the only country who opposed the Pakistan's entry into UNO in 1947. From 1947 till 1979 Afghanistan kept increasing its political pressure on Pakistan through a campaign for an independent state of 'Pashtunistan' (Fuller, 2008).

During Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan became the frontline state and ally of US to counter Soviet invasion. Pakistan trained and equipped the Mujahideen from all over the country with the monetary and technical support of US and Saudi Arabia. With Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and Najibullah Ahmed Zai government saw Pakistan interests in turmoil because of Indian government increased influence in Afghanistan. With the emergence of Taliban government in 1996, Pakistan got its influence back in Afghanistan. Islamabad officially recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan in May 1997 and urged the rest of the world to do the same (Saikal, 2012:227). After the incident of 9/11, Islamabad was forced to break with the Taliban and join the coalition led by the US.

After 18 years of continuous war in Afghanistan today Washington and Kabul believe that Pakistan has inevitable role in bringing Taliban to the negotiation table and still holds the key of getting Taliban and Afghan government to the table (Kaura, 2018:16). President Trump also urged Pakistan prime minister to play its cardinal role in bringing peace to Afghanistan. Pakistan has recently conducted peace talks with Taliban in Islamabad where the Pakistani foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi welcomed Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the leader of Taliban delegation. Pakistan played active role as cardinal player during the US- Taliban peace agreement and also helping the Afghan Government in the upcoming Intra-Afghan talks in Doha. It is important to mention that Pakistan is the most effected country by terrorism since 9/11 being a frontline ally of the US and has sacrificed more than 70,000 civilian and military person's lives. Recently Pakistan accused India for playing the role of peace spoiler in Afghan peace process and backing the ISIS Khurasan chapter. Shah Mahmood Qureshi and Major General Babar Iftikhar also presented dossier on Indian state sponsorship terrorism in Pakistan. They categorically accused India for using the Afghan soil for the terrorists activities targeting CPEC (Wire, 2020). Chinese scholar and former defence attaché Professor Chang Xizhong has applauded Pakistan role in Afghanistan reconciliation process, according to scholar Pakistan's role is significant in reconciliation in Afghanistan and without its active participation the peace agreement between USA and Taliban would have a distant dream (Nation, 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Afghanistan is in state of war since 1979. The time has proved that fighting is not the solution to the Afghanistan long conflict. Therefore, the Afghan government, Afghan people, international and regional players must work together for the permanent peace in Afghanistan. For achieving positive peace, the following should be taken into consideration:

- International and regional community must stop their proxy wars inside Afghanistan as instable Afghanistan is not in favor of anyone.
- International community must promote constructive dialogues with the Taliban and other armed groups using their influence for bringing the peace in Afghanistan.
- Afghan civil society must work to bridge the widening gap between the government and the Afghan people.
- Afghan government must effectively tackle the high rate of corruption, ethnic differences and poverty by the help of international community.
- Ordinary Afghan men, women and youth must be included in peace process through intra Afghan peace talks.
- The capacity and strength of Afghan National Army and Police must be enhanced with the help of international community.

CONCLUSION

The political and strategic situation of Afghanistan is a scrapheap challenge for the regional and international players. The destabilization in Afghanistan has far reaching and long-term implications on international political and security situation of the world. Since war against terrorism started facets of efforts for reconciliation and peace has been done. However, great deal of impediments in the process of determining peace in Afghanistan has misunderstanding between America and Taliban, sense of skepticism among different factions in Afghanistan and the ambiguous role foreign powers. It can be inferred from the historic annals and current situation of Afghanistan that until all domestic and international players in Afghanistan play their positive role in peace making; peace and reconciliation in the country appears to be a distance dream.

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