

## Afghanistan: From US Occupation Towards Transition

Authors

Irfan Khan<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Bakhtiar Khan<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Jamal Shah<sup>3</sup>, Sajjad Ali<sup>4</sup>

### Abstract

This research work is an effort to analyze the Afghanistan peace process from a transition perspective. According to Aljazeera, "after 18 months of talks and nearly 20 years of war, the Taliban and the United States of America have signed an agreement aimed at paving the way for peace in Afghanistan and the departure of foreign troops" Intra-Afghan negotiations followed the US-Taliban peace agreement after fulfilling the pre-conditions by both Taliban and the Afghan government. Previously, U.S. denied direct negotiations with the Taliban but in 2017 Trump Administration revised its Afghan policy and started direct negotiations with the Taliban. Similarly, the Taliban was not ready to negotiate with the U.S. until the full withdrawal of foreign forces. In the same fashion, Taliban wasn't ready to sit at the same table with a "puppet" government. If successful, the said process will initiate the transition from where Afghanistan either could transform itself or the history of the 1990s could repeat itself. Afghanistan has witnessed a transition in the 90s, which was featured by a destructive civil war.

Similarly, after 19 years of US-NATO intervention and war against the so-called terrorism in Afghanistan, the country is at the crossroad of its history once again. The paper argues that agreements are easy to conclude, but it is hard to live up to agreed rules and bargains. Therefore, Afghanistan could emerge as a regional connector in the changing regional geostrategic realities or a troubled and ungoverned country. In a nutshell, this research tries to answer how the currently expected transition could be different from the past? And that how a possible tug of war between and among various ethnic groups and factions be avoided? Furthermore, the importance of Afghanistan in changing regional and global dynamics is also multifaceted. This research work will try to answer these questions in detail.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer in Political Science, University of Buner.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor in Political Science University of Buner.

<sup>3</sup> Associate Professor GPGC Mardan.

<sup>4</sup> Lecturer in Political Science, University of Buner.

Keywords: transition, peace talks, civil war, US-Taliban, Afghan.

## Introduction

Peace through dialogues seems the only way left in Afghanistan. For 19 years, the U.S. and her allies fought against the Taliban; however, they produced meager results, if not any. Since U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and toppling the Taliban government, several attempts were made to negotiate with the Taliban. Since these efforts have been launched, the Taliban have repeatedly denied negotiations with the Afghan government. According to the Taliban, the Afghan government is a "puppet government," lacking their will. Previous efforts somehow failed and did not produce any substantial results.

Similarly, United States (U.S.) had denied direct negotiations with the Taliban until the Trump administration. President Donald Trump ordered direct talks and negotiations with the Taliban. The development is seen as a major shift in American policy. (Baloch 2019) U.S. had declared that an intra-Afghan dialogue would follow the agreement between Taliban and U.S.. Peace talks between Taliban and U.S. continued for nine months and were near to a conclusion. In the meantime, Trump "called off" negotiations due to Kabul's attack in which an American soldier was killed. However, backdoor diplomacy and negotiations continued and ultimately resulted in a peace agreement between the Taliban and the U.S., followed by intra-Afghan dialogues.

In February 1919, in the Kabul Process conference, President Ghani had offered a ceasefire, removal of sanctions, release of prisoners, and Taliban recognition as a political party. He also offered fresh elections and a review of the constitution. (Kaura 2018) This was a bold offer towards the transition, but initially, the Taliban denied negotiating with Kabul Government.

The success of negotiations depends on intra-Afghan dialogues and different stakeholders' approaches to the peace agreement. In the post-Soviet drawdown, Mujahedeen fighters started an anti-government offensive, and ultimately overthrew the Soviet's installed Najibullah government in Kabul. After overthrowing the government, Mujahedeen groups agreed to a power-sharing formula in Peshawar Accord and then in Islamabad Accord. Pakistan brokered these deals among different Mujahedeen groups. However, the transition did not proceed as it was proposed in these two accords, and ultimately Mujahedeen groups turned on each other to secure much of the war booty. Similarly, in the post-US intervention in Afghanistan, several efforts were made for a negotiated settlement but largely failed. Pakistan facilitates current talks.

This research work is an effort to investigate the current peace process and expected U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in a futuristic perspective keeping in view the 1990s transition process. Before discussing the currently prevailing circumstances in Afghanistan, it is pertinent to provide a historical background of the post-Soviet transition and its results.

## Background

On 27 December 1979, the USSR special forces started a military operation in Kabul to change the government before a temporary deployment of Soviet forces to assist the transition and political leadership in keeping political stability. The Soviet Union was expecting that her forces will be

stationed in Afghanistan for three to six months. Still, as time passed, the situation deteriorated, and it took ten years to withdraw their forces. After the conclusion of the Geneva Accord signed by the USSR, U.S., Pakistan, Afghanistan's government, it only became possible. After years of warfare, Soviet Union pulled back her forces and left a pro-Russian Pashtun president Muhammad Najibullah, installed in 1986. After their withdrawal his government rested on Russian political, economic, and security assistance. As the USSR support dried up after her disintegration Najibullah's government did not hold for long. It was forced from office by Mujahedeen fighters and a rebellious group of his army<sup>5</sup>. Several ethnic rival groups were fighting for control of Kabul. These groups had their support constituencies, including Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. (Sial 2013)

During the last years, USSR focused on the Afghan security forces' capacity building to lead the fight against Mujahedeen from the front. Furthermore, Soviet Union also started introducing reform to the people's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Soviet Politburo was divided on the issue of the nature of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. A section of Politburo believed that they can still win the war" through increased force or could be concluded through negotiations leading to a favorable outcome" Regarding the increased force, the Politburo members meant "increased quality" of troops and expansion of missions, not the number of troops. However, in 1986 the Soviet Politburo changed its policy from maintaining a friendly government in Kabul to a neutral withdrawal. (Vestenskov 2016)

After the Geneva Accords, USSR support to Najib's government remained continued in military assistance and economic development. Still, of Russia's disintegration, her attention got diverted, and she engaged in her internal matters. The said development led to the decreased support to the Kabul government. Furthermore, the rival factions were also busy increasing their power and holdings. In 1992, Najib control was constantly decreasing. His army revolted against him and, with the help of rival factions, ultimately forced from office. (Sial 2013)

It is important to mention that Afghan society is a tribal and multi-ethnic society proven to the tribal feuds. After Soviet withdrawal and Najib's government dismissal, these multi-ethnic Jihadist groups who played a vital role in the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union turned on each other. Key Jihadists had their private militias loyal to them (united on tribal connection). There were/are several warlords who had diverse support bases and ethnic composition like Pashtuns, Uzbek, and Tajiks. Jamiat-e-Islami of Rabba Hikmatyar's Hizb-e-Islam, Hizbe-e-Islami of Younis, Ittihad-e-Islami of Sayyaf, Harkat-e-Inqilab of Nabi, Maha-e-Milli led Gilani, and Jabha-e-Milli led Mojaddad are groups who allied. They had their basis in Peshawar and Quetta. Pakistan supported them.<sup>6</sup> Several other militant groups had their support constituency in the Shia population living in the central parts of Afghanistan called Hazarajat (Iran also supported them). These Jihadi-ethnic groups are Shura-e-Ittefaq-e-Islami, Dawat-e-Ettehad-e-Islami, Nazhat-e-Islami, Sazman

---

<sup>5</sup> Due to ethnic rivalries and decrease in the USSR financial and military support, his army generals had to secure their future in the post-Najibullah era, because the end of his government was inevitable.

<sup>6</sup> Hizb-e-Islami and Ittehad-e-Islami are considered fundamentalists while the remaining three i.e. Harakat-e-Inqilabi, Mahaze-e-Milli, and Jabha-e-Milli are considered moderates.

Nayroye-Islami, Harkat-e-Islami (Javed), Hizb Ullah and Jabha-e-Muttah and Muttahid-e-Islami. (Bazai 2008)

Similarly, to secure the booty of war in the post-Soviet withdrawal era, a coalition of non-Pashtun ethnic groups, primarily Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazara's called Northern Alliance<sup>7</sup> or United Islamic Front, was formed in 1992. Some Pashtun factions particularly joined the Northern Alliance in the leadership of Abdul Haq and Haji Abdul Qadir. The coalition overthrew Najib's government. Later on, when the Taliban got control of Kabul and the majority areas of Afghanistan, these groups became active and started their anti-Taliban activities. Burhan Uddin Rabbani (president of Afghanistan from 1992-1996), Ahmad Shah Masood, who was commanding the Northern Alliance forces until his assassination, Muhammad Fahim as group's intelligence head<sup>8</sup> and Rashid Abdul Rashid Dostum, leader of the Jombesh-e-Melli<sup>9</sup> who is ethnically and Uzbek were the main leader of the Northern Alliance.

Further, Northern Alliance had not played any role in electoral politics; however, later on in the post-9/11 and Geneva Accord turned to electoral politics. Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah had previously worked with the Northern Alliance. (PVC 2014)

Intra-Afghan talks were held in Peshawar and Peshawar Accord, followed by talks in Islamabad. All key stakeholders, particularly Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, participated in these talks. On occasion, the Iranian deputy foreign minister Alauddin Broujerdi said about the presence of all stakeholders, "They recognize their problems can no longer be resolved through military means... Every group is a part of the Afghan scene... Hekmatyar too is a reality... Both we and Pakistan have told them that you are no longer fighting a jihad; you are fighting with your own brothers" However, the transition did not proceed as planned—Mujahedeen's groups fighting broke out on the power-sharing ethnic color. Despite having a power-sharing formula and settled way forward, once again, war broke out in Kabul between Hikmatyaar forces and Rashid Dostum, who had Ahmad Shah Masood. (Bazai 2008) In a nutshell, due to the internal feuds, the transition got off track, and a new group emerged, i.e., the Taliban, on the Afghan scene.

### **Current Prevailing Scenario in Afghanistan**

After more than 18 years, Afghanistan is at the same crossroad facing the same problem. After years of war, major stakeholders are willing to show flexibility to further the peace process. This flexibility could be seen as a sign of recognition and acceptance that this long war could not be won through fighting anymore.

Karzai's government favored negotiations with the Taliban. The idea did not find any ground until the Barak Obama government in America amid growing Taliban activities since 2006 and

<sup>7</sup> According to a BBC report the Northern Alliance was supported and funded by the Iran, Russia, India, Tajikistan, the United States. (Symon 2001, BBC 2001)

<sup>8</sup> When Ahmad Shah Masood who was chief of the groups forces was assassinated in 2001 Muhammad Fahim was promoted the forces general of the Northern Alliance.

<sup>9</sup> He was honored the declaration of him as Marshal after the agreement between Asharaf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah in the post-2019 elections as result of the power sharing agreement.

consolidation of power as a major contestant since 2008. Furthermore, the growing financial and human cost of the war was an increasing concern for the western allies and the U.S. itself. (Setas 2013)

The first serious effort for negotiations in the post-9/11 era was made in the 2009 presidential elections in Afghanistan. These talks were brokered by Ahmad Wali Karzai, the Kandahar province's governor. After a short while, Pakistan arrested Mullah Baradar (second in Command after Mullah Muhammad Omar) from Karachi in a joint intelligence operation conducted by ISI and CIA. The move was considered a response to the talks without Pakistan's concurrence and their conduct behind Pakistan's back. Similarly, the Taliban and the Afghan government's rapprochement process ended, and president Karzai accused Islamabad of sabotaging the negotiations (Setas 2013).

In November 2010, the New York Times revealed that NATO and the Afghan government had maintained contact with an individual they were supposed to be a Taliban representative. The person had also pocketed a substantial amount of money, which later proved to be an intelligence failure. It was also rumored that ISI might be involved in the affair to assess the U.S. and Afghan government position; however, it was not proven (Setas 2013). In November 2010, the German Intelligence Agency BND mediated between the Taliban representative Mullah Syed Tayyab Agha and U.S. representatives. These were four rounds of Talks held from November 2010 and August 2011. Representatives from BND and the Qatari Royal family also participated in these talks. At the end of the talks, several Taliban members and associated organizations were removed from the United Nations sanctions list on the U.S. request. Moreover, prisoner's exchange and the agreement on establishing a permanent office for the Taliban at Doha in Qatar were also agreed upon and implemented. (Ahmed 2012)

### **US-Taliban Talks**

The situation in Afghanistan is very complicated. Multiple stockholders in the Afghan peace talks stacks differ entirely from each other. These stockholders, including the Taliban, the Afghanistan government, U.S. and NATO, Pakistan, Iran, and other regional states, have interests. Russia, China, and India are also actively engaged in the Afghan issue due to Afghanistan's geostrategic importance and location.

In July 2015, talks between the Taliban and America were arranged by Pakistan at Marri. However, these talks ended with the news leak of Mullah Omar's death. (Baloch 2019)

The flexibility in the U.S. behaviors towards the Afghan issue was the realization of the gravity of the situation that this war could not be won by mere use of force. However, previously, Hakim Ullah Mehsood<sup>10</sup> in a drone strand Osama's killing in a military operation conducted inside Pakistan without informing Pakistani authorities in Abbottabad had serious consequences for the dialogue

---

<sup>10</sup> According to BBC, Hakimullah was loosely in control of the more than 30 militant groups operating in Pakistan's north-west...and had a \$5m on his head as well as a small bounty offered by Pakistan."

process increased the trust deficit between Pakistan and America. (Craig 2013) Similarly, the Raymond Davis shooting in Lahore, Osama Bin Laden raid, and the Salala incident compelled Islamabad to close NATO supply routes through its territory. However, the standoff was resolved through cautious diplomacy. The strategic dissonance between Pakistan and America span over the past three decades. In the post-9/11 era, U.S. has/had used the "Do More" mantra regarding Afghanistan constantly; however, Pakistan had steadfastly pursued its national security interests. (Faisal 2018)

In August 2017, President Donald Trump announced what is called his new South Asian strategy. Many observers interpreted the policy as renewed U.S. commitment to the Afghan issue. In his policy statement, Trump announced expanded targeting authorities for U.S. forces in Afghanistan, increasing pressure on Pakistan, and a modest increase in the U.S. and international forces. However, in July 2018, the administration ordered direct talks with the Taliban, excluding the Afghan government from negotiations. The move was against the previous stance " Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" of the U.S. government. (Thomas 2019)

Following the announcement, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo appointed Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as Special Representative on Afghan Reconciliation on 21 September 2018. Khalilzad's single job is the Afghan reconciliation process" be full-time focused on developing the opportunities to get Afghans and the Taliban to come to a reconciliation. That will be his singular mission statement" said U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo. (Kelemen 2018) Since Khalilzad has met with the Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar, the Taliban has its political office. He also had consultations with the Afghan, Pakistani, and other regional states. (Thomas 2019)

Pakistan has a key role in the peace process in Afghanistan. U.S. and Afghan governments constantly blame Pakistan for their troubles against the Taliban, Al Qaida, and Haqqani Network. However, several times, they have formally recognized Pakistan's contribution to the war against terrorism and the Afghan cause. After 9/11, Pakistan took a "U-turn" in her foreign policy. Previously, Pakistan supported the Taliban regime, but when the U.S. embarked on its crusade against global terrorism, Pakistan joined the U.S. coalition and became a non-NATO ally. Furthermore, Pakistan has provided every possible assistance to the U.S. and NATO forces, ranging from using its land routes for logistical support to the use of its airfields. Pakistan has also shared intelligence information with America and its allies in Afghanistan.

Though Pakistan is assisting the U.S. in the war against terrorism, it has favored Afghanistan's negotiated settlement. Pakistan has several times reiterated its resolve to support an "Afghan led-Afghan own" peace process. On the occasion of Ashraf Ghani's visit to Pakistan, the foreign minister of Pakistan Shah Mehmood Qurashi said, " We will encourage and facilitate an intra-Afghan dialogue, which we feel is essential for reconciliation. We will try and each other's trust" Similarly, on his recent visit to Pakistan, Ashraf Ghani recognized the importance of Pakistan to the Afghan issue; he said, " Pakistan has an important role, and there are strong interdependencies between [the] Taliban and Pakistan. We need to recognize this and arrive at programmatic approaches to move from conflict to cooperate". (Gul 2019)

In his August 2017 speech, Trump announced a new approach toward Pakistan. He said, " We can no longer be silaboutPakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban, and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond" He also valued the partnership with Pakistan against terrorism at the same time. (Thomas 2019) To forward the peace process, the US seeks Pakistan's help which was provided, and the Taliban were brought to the negotiation table.

Regarding the peace process and building trust with the Afghan government on the occasion of Ghani visit foreign minister of Pakistan Shah Mehmood Qurashi as quoted above," We will encourage and facilitate an intra-Afghan dialogue, which we feel is essential for reconciliation, and we will try and each other's trust" He emphasized the need for both the countries to open" a new chapt" in their bilateral relations. "Let this visit of yours be a watershed; let this visit of yours be a turning point so we don't accuse each other of quoting the past. We look towards the future with hope and encouragement" the foreign minister stressed (Gul 2019).

Mike Pompeo, after six days of negotiations in January 2018, declared," The Taliban have committed, to our satisfaction, to do what is necessary that would prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming a platform for international terrorist groups or individual" in return the immediate reduction of 5000 US troops and ultimate withdrawal of foreign forces. After a long series of talks, on 12 March 2019, Khalilzad announced that a draft agreement has been reached out on counterterrorism assurances and Utroop's withdrawal after a long series of talks. He said, after the agreement's finalization" the Taliban and other Afghans, including the government, will begin intra-Afghan negotiations on a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire" (Thomas 2019).

Negotiations between the Taliban political wing and the U.S. reconciliation team led by Zalmay Khalilzad were continued for nine months and were almost concluded. On 07 September, President Trump had invited key Taliban leaders and President Ashraf Ghani to separately meet him at Camp David. In the meantime, the Taliban conducted an attack in Kabul and killed several people, including one American soldier. Trump immediately canceled the meeting and called off talks via Twitter in a series of tweets. According to him, the Taliban were doing so to get themselves in a little bit better negotiation position which he said," they cannot do it with m" (Aljazeera 2019).

The move surprised many, even senior White House officials, off guard and raised serious questions about the Trump administration's policy in Afghanistan's future. Following the development, secretary of state Pompeo said in an interview," we were close...Taliban failed to live-up to a series of commitments they had made" leading the president to walk away from the deal. (Thomas 2019)

The reasons given for the cancellation of talks by Trump and his secretary of state seem illogical. Because in 2019, 19 U.S. soldiers were killed in combat, further Taliban have conducted large-scale attacks on military and civilian targets along the Doha process. The following could be potential motivating factors for the decision

- Before signing a deal to end the longest U.S. war on any foreign territory, it is pertinent to think several times because the U.S. has given so much to this war in terms of finances,

human lives, and last, but not least, some would argue that the U.S. standing in the international relations is at stake.

Taliban spokesperson declared the move as astonishing. While talking to Aljazeera exclusively, Sohail Shaheen<sup>11</sup> said that the deal was finalized, and copies of the same document were given to the U.S., Taliban, and Qatari sides. According to Khalilzad Taliban have agreed to disassociate themselves from al-Qaida. (Aljazeera 2019).

### **US-Taliban Agreement**

After 18 months of talks and nearly 20 years of war, the Taliban and the United States have signed an agreement to pave the way for peace in Afghanistan and the departure of the foreign troop," reported Aljazeera on 29 February 2020. (Aljazeera 2020) Zalmay Khalilzad, US special envoy, and Mullah Abul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban political office head, signed the agreement in international observers<sup>12</sup>, including" Pakistan, Qatar, Turkey, India, Indonesia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan" (Qazi 2020). The comprehensive peace agreement consists of four parts (for detail see index), i.e., the guarantee and assurance from Taliban to prevent any individual or group from using Afghan soil against the security of the U.S. or her allies; secondly, guarantee and enforcement mechanism and the timeline for the withdrawal of all U.S. and allies forces from Afghanistan, thirdly, initiation of intra-Afghan dialogue and lastly a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire as on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations (Agreement 2020).

Agreement on the first two parts paves the way for the last two parts. The U.S. agreed in part first of the agreement to withdraw all of her and her allies' forces from Afghanistan within 14 months of the agreement starting from the agreement. In the first 135 days, the U.S. had to reduce her Afghanistan forces to 8,600 and approximate reduction in her allies and coalition forces. She had to withdraw her forces from five military bases. Similarly, the rest of the forces" withdrawal and military should be vacated in the prescribed time (Agreement 2020).

The political and combatant prisoners' release was made part of the agreement as a confidence-building measure. The consultation of the relevant sides was to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners. Still, at the same time, the Taliban give surety that after their release, they will not take part in the anti-US and her allies' activates. Taliban were also to release 1,000 prisoners of the other sides (Agreement 2020). Initially, Afghan president Ashraf Ghani denied 5,000 Taliban prisoners as a pre-condition for talks with the Taliban. He said Kabul's reports after a day of the agreement that his government was not part of any clause of the agreement and therefore had no commitment to release Taliban prisoners (Aljazeera 2020). Taliban responded to the Afghan government's stance that they would not negotiate without their release and accused the government of delaying the process. Ashraf Ghani called the gathering of on in a Loya Jirga<sup>13</sup>, to discuss the issue of Taliban

---

<sup>11</sup> Sohail Shaheen is spokesperson of Afghan Taliban.

<sup>12</sup> Stated in the actual agreement signed between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan/Taliban and United States of America.

<sup>13</sup> Traditional gathering of the elder and prominent citizens.



prisoners. Taking to the Girga, secretary of state Mike Pompeo urged the gathering their release, although he acknowledged the move was unpopular (Dawn 2020, Dawn 2020).

The intra-Afghan talks were delayed due to the prisoner's release. Australia and France objected to the release of six prisoners of Taliban in the list of 5,000 who were involved in the killing of their nationals, but the issue was resolved as these six prisoners were transferred to Qatar where they will remain in prison. Talks started in Doha, Qatar on 12 September 2020 (Aljazeera 2020).

Abdullah Abdullah is leading the Afghan government negotiation team. He was appointed the chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation after the power-sharing agreement in the post- September 2019 presidential elections<sup>14</sup> between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah (Aljazeera 2020).

Currently, intra-Afghan talks are in progress and both parties have visited various power centers. Currently, the Taliban delegation visited Islamabad. (Dawn 2020) Similarly, Abdullah Abdullah led a delegation to Islamabad, Iran (president.gov.af 2020) and even to India (Times 2020).

It was also agreed in the peace agreement which was signed between the Taliban and U.S. government that the U.S. will review its current sanction and reward list against the Taliban. In the same fashion, America will start a diplomatic engagement with other United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and Afghanistan to remove the Taliban from the sanctions list. Similarly, America and its allies will refrain to interfere in the internal matters of Afghanistan and the use of force. Taliban agreed in the agreement that Afghan soil will not be used by any individual or group including Al-Qaida against the U.S. and its allies' security and that Taliban will send a clear message to those who threaten the security of the U.S. and her allies that they will not cooperate with the. Last but not least U.S. will request the recognition and endorsement of this agreement from UNSC. (Agreement 2020)

Violence between the Taliban and the Afghan government continues despite negotiations. The Afghan government is trying to conclude a lasting ceasefire agreement with the Taliban (Dawn 2020) but till the writing of these lines with no results. Negotiations' major issue is to agree on the future political system of Afghanistan and an agreed explanation of Islam. Experts argue that signing an agreement with the U.S. was the easy part, but the intra-Afghan negotiations and implementation of the agreements will be the hardest part which will surely test the wits and nerves of different stakeholders in Afghanistan.

### **Intra-Afghan Talks**

---

<sup>14</sup> The September 2019 presidential elections were won by Ashraf Ghani but Abdullah Abdullah alleged them and declared himself president. Both Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah sworn in as Presidents of Afghanistan in separated ceremonies. After a month political stalemate, the issue was resolved through a power sharing agreement between the two, in which Abdullah was appointed the Chairman of the High Peace Council to lead the intra-Afghan Peace talks, 50 percent in cabinet and 50 percent governors were to be also elected from his party or supporters.

According to Khalilzad, after the conclusion of the agreement between the U.S. and Taliban, intra-Afghan including the Afghan government will be conducted for a comprehensive cease-fire and political settlement. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has shown his concerns about the US-Taliban talks which have excluded the Afghan government. He has warned in a televised address to the nation that any agreement to withdraw the U.S. forces which did not include the Afghan government could be catastrophic. He pointed to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, followed by civil war and the rise of the Taliban. On the other hand, Taliban spokesperson has stated that they do not want hegemony in the entire country.

In contrast, another spokesperson has stated that the Taliban want to establish the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. (Thomas 2019) Currently, dialogue and war are going hand in hand. Still, largely there is uncertainty" Delegates of warring sides in Afghanistan announced Wednesday they had agreed on a framework for their peace negotiations aimed at the end the country's protracted conflict" reported by the voice of America on 02 December 2020, and that "the procedure, including its preamble of the negotiation, has been finalized. From now on, the negotiation will begin on the agenda." Furthermore, Khalilzad tweeted after this development that" as negotiations on a political roadmap and permanent ceasefire begin, we will work hard with all sides for serious reduction of violence and even a ceasefire during this period." (Gul, Voice of America 2020) The peace process with development will enter into another phase and the agreement will provide a springboard to further the dialogue. It also reflects the will for dialogue or for "peace by peaceful means."

### **Challenges and Possibilities**

There are various obstacles to the negotiations process including lack of full commitment and not the inclusion of all major stakeholders in the process, the trust deficit between/among U.S. and Pakistan and Afghanistan and Pakistan governments, lastly, the mad obsession of blaming each other for any incident occurs without investigations. Moreover, the nature of the Afghan society itself is a major obstacle to the establishment of lasting peace.

Afghanistan has faced a similar situation 30 years ago. After the withdrawal of the forces, Soviet Union continued financial assistance to their installed government which kept it going for three years. However, after the USSR disintegration, the government was overthrown by a coalition of Mujahedeen fighters. These Mujahedeen fighters agreed on power-sharing formula but later on turned on each other and started a bloody civil war. Taliban is the product of that uncertain situation. After almost thirty years, Afghanistan is at the same crossroad facing the same problem. The current Afghan government and its military who are fighting Taliban fighters are heavily dependent on U.S. financial assistance. Ashraf Ghani in a statement said, "[W]e will not be able to support our army for six months without U.S. [financial] support." (Thomas 2019) Therefore if the U.S. wants to preserve whatever she secured in the past 18 years, she and her allies need to continue their financial support to the Afghanistan government after their withdrawal.

A new hardliner terrorist group Islamic State (I.S.) established itself in Afghanistan in 2015. However, the group is facing multiple countervailing forces. (Felbab-Brown 2017) Initially, the

group occupied large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria and expanded itself to different areas in South Asia. They declared Afghanistan as one of their province called “Wilayat Khorasan.” Several dissident militants from different groups have joined and affiliated themselves with I.S. in Afghanistan. The organization has clashed several times with the Taliban fighters. It appears that I.S. has limited control but still its presence needs to be considered as a threat to future stability and peace.

Regional dynamics are fragile and are changing. Geo-strategically Afghanistan occupies an important place and has the potential to provide a connectivity corridor between Central Asia and South Asia and beyond. China has embarked on its regional ambitions and has plans for Afghanistan in her “One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR)”.

Russia is an important regional and neighboring state of Afghanistan. In the past two decades, Russia has consolidated its power and improved its regional and international standing. Though in the post-1991 era, Russia has not shown any great interest in the Afghanistan issue, however, currently, she had brought changes to her regional outlook by active involvement in the ongoing peace process. Taliban negotiation team, the representatives of the Afghan government, and the U.S. negotiators have visited several times Russia for consultations.

Pakistan has serious concerns about the increasing role of India in Afghanistan with the help of the U.S. Despite Pakistan’s security concerns, India is the largest contributor to the Afghanistan reconstruction. Trump did encourage India to play a greater role in the economic development of Afghanistan (Thomas 2019).

During the Afghan Jihad years, Iran took an active part in the war against USSR by supporting and sponsoring Shia Jihadist organizations. Similarly, in the post-Soviet Withdrawal era, she actively participated in the negotiations. Iran still has connections with several groups inside and outside the government. However, Iran does not pose any threat to the peace process in Afghanistan.

Deals could be signed and agreed upon, but their implementation process which follows the agreement is a critical and difficult phase. As discussed above a peace agreement has been signed between the Taliban and the U.S. government followed by intra-Afghan dialogue but the implementation of the agreement will be a challenge in the complex Afghan multi-ethnic, sectarian, and in the involvement of vested interests. Furthermore, uninterrupted economic aid and capacity-building programs for both civilian and military purposes need to be carried out. Therefore, the international community, major powers including U.S., Russia, China, and other regional and neighboring states should continue assistance to the Afghanistan government in both the short and long term in multiple sectors. They should take an active part in the rebuilding process of Afghanistan if they want to avoid another series of militancy for many unexpected years to come because the Afghan issue is an international issue affecting the world community.

Reforms in various sectors particularly regarding accountability and corruption need to be implemented.

Last but not the least, Afghans must take the responsibility for their nation and state-building and the creation of national cohesion. Blaming outside powers for their failures will bring nothing but misery and pain.

In the future, continued economic assistance is important to sustain the Kabul government, various expenses like military, economic development, and capacity building in various sectors.

## Conclusion

The complexity of politics in Afghanistan and the Afghan issue resides in its social construct which has been shattered into pieces in the past several decades. Multiple actors are responsible for the said results. Currently, Afghanistan stands at a crossroads where no way, but one i.e. discussions could lead to political stability and socio-economic progress. It could be concluded from the discussion that there are certain similarities in the post-Soviet and current prevailing circumstances. To avoid the worst-case scenario, parties have shown significant flexibility to initiate direct negotiations after a prolonged war. U.S. President Trump initiated direct dialogues with the Taliban. Both parties signed a peace treaty on 19 February 2020. In this agreement, the U.S. agreed to a time-bound withdrawal of her forces from Afghanistan. In return, the Afghan Taliban agreed to start an intra-Afghan dialogue and to separate themselves from the Al-Qaida and other such outfits who are trying to target the U.S. and her allies' interests. Last but not the least, the researchers suggest that though talks are in progress still worst-case scenarios exist and the parties need to work together to avoid them.

## References

- Agreement, Peace. 2020. "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America." 2 29.
- Ahmed, Rashid. 2012. "Pakistan on the Brink. The Future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West." *Allen Lane, New Delhi*.
- Aljazeera. 2020. *President Ghani rejects peace deal's prisoner swap with Taliban*. 3 1. Accessed 11 14, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/1/president-ghani-rejects-peace-deals-prisoner-swap-with-taliban>.
- . 2020. *Taliban has finalised negotiating team for intra-Afghan talks: AP*. 8 20. Accessed 11 15, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/24/taliban-has-finalised-negotiating-team-for-intra-afghan-talks-ap>.
- . 2020. *Talks between Afghan government and Taliban open in Qatar*. 9 12. Accessed 14 11, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/12/talks-between-afghan-government-and-taliban-open-in-qatar>.

- . 2019. *U.S. Afghan peace envoy takes push for peace to Pakistan*. 14 November. Accessed 14 November, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/afghan-peace-envoy-takes-push-peace-pakistan-191029061535635.html>.
- . 2020. *What does the Taliban-US agreement say?* 29. Accessed 11 14, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/29/what-does-the-taliban-us-agreement-say>.
- Baloch, Sehar. 2019. "زلّمے خلیل زاد کا افغان امن مشن مشکل ہوتا جا رہا ہے۔" *BBC Urdu*, April 5.
- Bazai, Abdul Manan. 2008. "An Assessment of Pak-Afghan Relations since 1947 upto 2001." *To the department of Politics and International Relations Unniversity of Quetta*.
- Bazai, Abdul Manan. 2008. "AN ASSESSMENT OF PAK-AFGHAN RELATIONS, SINCE 1947 UPTO 2001." *To the department of Politics and International Relations Unniversity of Quetta*.
- BBC. 2001. "Who are the Northern Alliance?" *BBC News*, 13 November. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/1652187.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1652187.stm).
- Craig, Tim. 2013. "Drone kills Taliban chief Hakimullah Mehsud; Pakistan accuses U.S. of derailing peace talk." *The Washington Post*, 02 November.
- Dawn. 2020. *Abdullah made fragile gains for Afghan peace during Pakistan trip*. 10 2. Accessed 11 15, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/10/2/abdullah-made-fragile-gains-for-afghan-peace-during-pakistan-trip>.
- . 2020. *Afghan govt begins releasing last Taliban prisoners*. 8 15. Accessed 11 14, 14. [dawn.com/news/1574469/afghan-govt-begins-releasing-last-taliban-prisoners](http://dawn.com/news/1574469/afghan-govt-begins-releasing-last-taliban-prisoners).
- . 2020. *Afghan govt releases 100 Taliban prisoners*. 04 4. Accessed 11 14, 2020. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1547670/afghan-govt-releases-100-taliban-prisoners>.
- Faisal, Muhammad. 2018. *South Asian Voices*. 06 February. Accessed 16 November, 2019. <https://southasianvoices.org/where-do-islamabad-and-washington-go-from-here/>.
- Felbab-Brown, Dr. Vanda. 2017. "Afghanistan Affectations: How to Break Political-Criminal Alliances in Context of Transition." *United Nations University Center for Policy Reseach, Crime-Conflict Nexus Seriess-8*.
- Gul, Ayaz. 2019. "Ghani Seeks Pakistan's Support for Afghan Peace Talks With Taliban." *Vioce of America*, 28 June.
- Kaura, Vinay. 2018. "Understanding the Complexities of the Afghan Peace Process." *ORF Occasional Paper*.
- Michele Kelemen, Diaa Hadid and Vanessa Romo. 2018. *NPR*. 05 September. Accessed 16 November, 2019.
- president.gov.af. 2020. *Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*. 11 5. Accessed 11 15, 2020. <https://president.gov.af/en/president-ghani-meets-with-chairman-of-high-council-for-national-reconciliation-4/>.

- PVC. 2014. *National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to terrorism*. October 14. Accessed 12 November, 2019. <https://www.start.umd.edu/baad/narratives/northern-alliance-or-united-islamic-front-salvation-afghanistan-uifsa>.
- Qazi, Shreena. 2020. *Afghanistan's Taliban, U.S. sign agreement aimed at ending war*. 29. Accessed 11 14, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/29/afghanistans-taliban-us-sign-agreement-aimed-at-ending-war>.
- Setas, Carlos. 2013. "Relations Between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the Peace with Process with the Afghan Taliban." *Doctorando en seguridad internacional por el IUGM*.
- Sial, Safdar. 2013. "Pakistan's Role and strategic Priorities in Afghanistan Since 1980." *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resouce Center*.
- Symon, Fiona. 2001. "Afghanistan's Northern Alliance." *BBC News*, 19 September. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/1552994.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1552994.stm).
- Thomas, Clayton. 2019. "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy In Brief." *Congressional Research Service*.
- Times, Hindustan. 2020. *Hindustan Times*. 10 11. Accessed 11 15, 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/abdullah-abdullah-concludes-visit-in-india/story-26hBTGun8bi7fTFF8HLo5K.html>.
- Vestenskov, David. 2016. "Transition in Afghanistan, Identifying lessons of withdrawal and capacity building in Afghanistan: From the Soviet enterprise to NATO's Resolute Support Mission." *Royal Danish Defence Collage*.