PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN: PERSPECTIVES & OPTIONS

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Abstract

Recently, Afghanistan witnessed an alternate vision of co-existence when the Afghan Government along with US support called for a unilateral ceasefire with the Taliban. The Taliban also conceded to an Eid Truce. After years of fighting, a glimpse of peace was witnessed. The Taliban forces were allowed to enter government controlled districts- after laying down their arms at security checkpoints- the local population, Afghan security forces personnel and Taliban members celebrated Eid together. Ghani offered to extend the ceasefire but Taliban forces reportedly turned down the offer and resumed operations on the 18th of June 2018. The smooth materialisation of the ceasefire has indicated that the possibility of coexistence amongst various segments of the Afghan society is an achievable reality. However, certain existential questions need to be addressed in order to build upon the recent gains:

1. How can a military approach create space for political solutions in Afghanistan- especially amidst diverging desired end states by various internal and external forces?
2. How can the Taliban's call to engage in direct talks with US be harmonised with Afghan Government's call for being recognised as the key authority?
3. What is the correct political dispensation for Afghan diversity?
4. How can the Afghan -war torn- socio economic fabric be reconstructed to make war a costly option for all parties?

In June 2018 a report titled <u>Incremental Peace in Afghanistan</u> was published by the by Conciliation Resources in its Accord Issue 27. The report gathered perspectives of various key authorities on Afghanistan and certain voices of the Afghan Taliban in order to map an outline of the various dynamics of the conflict and offer recommendations on the possible ways to create sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

Overview of the report

The report states that core drivers of conflict include a well-established war economy- this fuels and funds violence and the disputes of agreeable power sharing mechanisms remain persistent. Potential drivers of peace include war fatigue among the various Afghan segments and an international interest in peace and stability in Afghanistan.

While all parties acknowledge that there is no military solution to end the war- a major gap exists in words and actions- the authors of the report thus conclude devising an incremental peace framework. The process may be divided into short term and long term goals- the short term goal may be a reduction in violence by all parties. Whereas, the eventual long term goal may be of achieving a more inclusive social contract representative of all Afghans.

A suggested roadmap for the way forward is as follow:

1. A transformative cessation of violence. An incremental approach to peace in Afghanistan could start locally, reducing violence from the ground up.
2. Exclusion of Taliban has caused problems, thus there is a need to sustainable peace requires balancing centre–periphery or national–sub-national priorities for reconciliation.
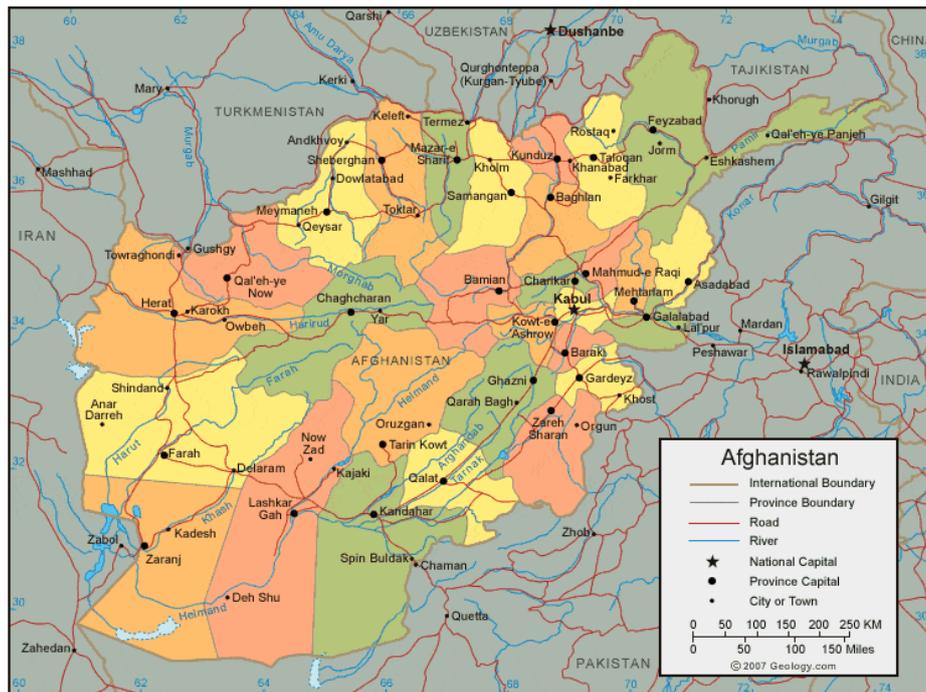
ABSTRACTS OF KEY VIEWS

SECTION I: LOCAL DYNAMICS

i.   Professor Thomas Barfield is a social anthropologist who conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork among pastoral nomads in pre-war northern Afghanistan during the mid-1970s.

In his view, the lack of legitimate space for dissent has been a persistent driver of violent resistance in Afghanistan.

A predominant political culture has evolved of power concentrated centrally in a single ruler who sets policy and distributes resources leaving no room for nonviolent opposition.

Regional devolution of power could alleviate pressure on the centre, but would still leave the core problem of how to introduce effective opposition politics.

Suggestion: An emerging political dynamic with potential to break this enduring deadlock may be found in Afghanistan's growing

young population, who increasingly see political participation as a right rather than a privilege and are making demands for more meaningful representation.

ii. Dr Astri Suhrke - a political scientist and a senior researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway.

The political logic of the Bonn process in 2001, was aimed to negotiate a stable polity and it was subordinate to the military, to remove the terrorist threat. A key condition was the exclusion of the Taliban. Demilitarising Northern Alliance militias, justice or human rights were not priorities. But post-Bonn opportunities to accommodate amenable Taliban were rejected, and factions that were represented in Bonn have entrenched themselves in power.

Suggestion: Future peace talks with the Taliban will need to decide between narrow power-sharing like Bonn or incorporating wider rights and principles. Bonn's incremental approach to broadening inclusion could work but could also again leave the door open to factional elite capture. A central lesson from Bonn is that prioritising Afghan over external interests is key to a peaceful and sustainable future.

iii. Heela Najibullah a peace and conflict researcher whose book Reconciliation and Social Healing in Afghanistan.

She recalls a lesson from the past- Afghan National Reconciliation Policy (NRP) in the 1980s and 90s – on how to negotiate with armed groups, and how to balance local, national and international interests to sustain focus on building an inclusive political settlement.

Suggestion: Combining traditional Afghan socio-political practices for consultation and decision-making with a pragmatic political strategy designed to build both domestic support and international legitimacy.

iv. Michael Semple- a Professor at the Senator George J Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, Queen's University Belfast.

He discusses the priorities issues that need to be addressed in a new social contract in Afghanistan. He identifies ten priority issues: the preservation of national unity and Afghan identity; international military forces; security, respect and basic needs for combatants and people affected by conflict; state-citizen relations and the role and privileges of elites; inclusive security reform; property, economic rights and the illicit economy; structure of government and consolidation of electoral democracy; promoting Islam and religious freedom; judiciary and legal system; and ethnicity, social inclusion and equality of opportunity.

Suggestion: In his view the fundamental challenges to renegotiating a renewed social contract in practice include a severe lack of trust in formal processes and agreements and a prevalent perception that national institutions are corrupt. Thus, a single, comprehensive peace agreement to agree a new social contract is unlikely to be achievable in Afghanistan.

A more viable alternative model would involve an incremental, phased approach that builds confidence over time. A dialogue-driven programme of implemented reforms and carefully nurtured cooperative relations has potential to address the root causes of the conflict. The best way to shape the conditions conducive to such a sustained process of dialogue and reform would be to agree a pause in the fighting early on. Conflict parties wishing to participate in such a sustained peace process would need first to sign up to the suspension of violence.

SECTION II: Taliban's Perspectives
i.   Felix Kuehn is – author of books on Taliban.

He states that misconceptions of the Taliban have complicated efforts to end the war in Afghanistan. The Taliban are not unified. From inception the movement has included distinct groups with different views on national and international policy. But the core message of the central leadership has resonated widely: Afghanistan needs to return to law and order, and the Taliban are

here to dispense security and justice based on Islam. The Taliban's resurgence in the 2000s mirrored their initial rise to power, facilitated by widespread public discontent with the new government. No group can survive in Afghanistan without local support, support which can never be won by fear alone.

Suggestion: The Taliban's narrative of the conflict in Afghanistan is not an alternative version of Afghanistan's history, but rather a missing piece of the larger puzzle of how to administer the country peacefully – a piece that remains ignored by much of the West. They see themselves and the US as the real stakeholders in the conflict and so likewise in any reconciliation process.

ii. Statement by- M. Suhail Shaheen- the Taliban Political Office in Qatar:

He is of the view that the main obstacle in this regard is the existence of the occupation. If the occupation ends, then the Islamic Emirate believes in the political resolution of issues.

This is to put an end to the fighting once and for all and bring about an inclusive Islamic system representing all afghan, in which none will feel marginalised or deprived.

To achieve this, there is need for a period of restoration of security so that the Afghan nation may take a breath of relief, and Afghans can consider the pattern of an Islamic Shura system.

He adds that the USA is the main party to the conflict. Thus, the key to the solution of the issue lies in the hand of the main party and then the Afghan Government is to be consulted on future government formation.

Suggestion: It will be appropriate for America to spend the money on peace and rehabilitation which it is now spending on war. As a pragmatic gesture, it should announce an end to occupation or give a date of withdrawal, then bring all their security concerns and

other matters of interests to the table for discussion. The Islamic Emirate is then ready to listen to their concerns and demands and discuss with them all. However, the Americans should also admit the legitimate rights of the Afghan Muslim people.

iii. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar – leader of Hizb-i-Islami

He states that the lack of official Taliban endorsement of peace negotiations obscures the reality that a majority within the movement want to see an end to the war. Power sharing in Afghanistan has failed because the groups involved accept neither each other nor the concept of power-sharing. Suggestion: Upcoming elections may present an opportunity to advance government reform.

SECTION III: Role of External Forces

i. Ambassador Douglas Lute - former United States Permanent Representative to NATO's Council, standing political body.

He discusses how the political and military strategies be integrated to support a peaceful political settlement in Afghanistan- mainly in light of US strategies. He states that contrasting interpretations of stabilisation in Afghanistan led to a flawed strategy: degrading the Taliban's military capability while building the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The efficacy of the 2009 US military surge was undermined by deploying troops to the wrong areas for the wrong reasons, and by a lack of complementary political action.

Decision-making at key moments of political-military tension was often driven by US domestic political priorities. For example: Inconsistency was exemplified by the killing of Taliban leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansour in 2016, rather than seeing him as a potential interlocutor in dialogue. President Obama made some specific commitments to advance a political solution, for example facilitating the opening of the Taliban Political Commission in Qatar. But following the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, it was increasingly hard for him to prioritise political action.

ii.   Professor Barnett R. Rubin- War on the Rocks.

He states that while the withdrawal of foreign troops brings threat of Afghan state collapse, but the possibility of permanent foreign military presence risks provoking regional backlash.

Within Afghanistan, political legitimacy is contested. Pashtuns see themselves as a dispossessed majority, the tribal legitimacy is declining and the Islamic legitimacy is increasingly blanketed with identity politics. Combatants have largely rejected possibilities for peace-making to deliver mutual gains through a win-win outcome, and have largely aspired to establish their military dominance in order to strengthen their bargaining positions.

Suggestion: Enhancing regional connectivity by encouraging the development of various connectivity projects may bring about stability in Afghanistan. He states that the stabilisation of Afghanistan would also require either the withdrawal of all foreign troops, as the Taliban demands, or agreement by all relevant powers to the terms of reference of a foreign military presence that poses a threat to no one.

Some key proposals to resolve the issue of foreign military presence include:

- Russia's proposal to neutralise Afghanistan.
- China's suggestion to replace NATO'S Operation Resolute Support with a UN peacekeeping force mandated by the Security Council.
- Pakistan's proposal to limit or eliminate the Indian presence and partially integrate the Afghan and Pakistan security forces through joint training.
- US plan to implement its Bilateral Security Agreement with Afghanistan in such a way as to induce all neighbouring states to bandwagon with the Americans, rather than balancing against it.

KEY SUGGESTIONS/CONCLUSIONS

- Promote Reduction in violence.
- Engage with factions of Taliban.
- Create agreed peace zones.
- Provide alternate means of livelihood to various Afghan insurgents.
- Improve governance.
- Increase support and resources for intra-Taliban dialogue.
- Establish a *hybrid* International Contact Group to support emerging Track 1 peace talks comprising state *and* non-state membership to bridge gaps between short- and long-term peace objectives. A hybrid group could help to link mediation tracks, providing both international political leverage to support and advise the parties and a channel to connect negotiations to different communities.