



Afghanistan: Hope and Perspectives

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In the course of the four decades of the Afghan conflict, brief periods of hope have alternated with frustration and deadlock in efforts for peace. The current optimism is generated by recent positive signals especially on the part of the United States and Pakistan. But it is too early to suggest that this time, nascent hope marks a turning point.

Since the American military intervention almost twenty years ago, there is increasing realization that four parties, namely, the Kabul government, the Afghan Taliban, the United States and Pakistan are central to peace and reconciliation. The first two are the principal antagonists. The US has its military presence and Pakistan became host to the Afghan Taliban as their leaders escaped into Pakistan after 9/11. Even if most of these leaders have moved back into Afghanistan where the Afghan Taliban are known to have influence over more than 40 percent of rural Afghanistan, some are believed to be in Pakistan, mixed with the millions of Afghan refugees mostly concentrated in the Tribal Areas. This article will examine what has changed to justify hope and what has been the thinking and positions of the four identified parties which complicate progress towards reconciliation and may well vitiate its future prospects.

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The Elements of Change

The important change has been the American nod to the Afghan Taliban and removal of the self-imposed taboo on direct contacts with them. It is a half-way recognition of the Taliban as the other principal party to any reconciliation. The Talks between the Taliban representatives and Alice Wells first and then Zalmay Khalilzad, are significant and crystalize a process which began tentatively with the opening of the Taliban office in Qatar in 2013. However, Zalmay Khalilzad's recent remark that a political settlement, which he later down-graded to "road map", could be achieved as early as by next April is overly up-beat. The American engagement with the Taliban has just begun and its course is uncertain.

Indications of the second important change are reflected in Pakistan's recent statements and actions. Prime Minister Imran Khan's recent remarks to Lally Weymouth that Pakistan would not like to see the US withdraw from Afghanistan in a hurry are most relevant as a signal to all parties in particular the Afghan Taliban leaders. He argued that Pakistan would not want the repetition of chaos that had followed the withdrawal of the Soviet forces and the US indifference towards Afghanistan in the 1990s. DG (ISPR) reaffirmed this position suggesting that Islamabad and Rawalpindi are on the same page on this count. This too is important even though there is no guarantee against the page turning to a new theme. Other positive signs included the release of Mullah Baradar, and more emphatic official statements from Islamabad that Pakistan will do all it can to prevent operations by the Afghan Taliban from its territory and to push them to participate in a peace process. The third positive development has been the presence of the Afghan Taliban and Kabul representatives at the Moscow Format in early November, notwithstanding the initial reluctance of the Kabul government and the subsequent statement by the Afghan Taliban that their participation was not meant for any talks.

The Taliban representatives came to the recently held conference in the UAE. They met Zalmay Khalilzad but declined to have talks with Kabul representatives. Pakistani, Saudi and Emirati representatives also participated in the conference. The Taliban representation notably included members of the Haqqani network. The UAE conference also marked visible cooperation between Pakistan and the United States which was sought by President Donald Trump in a letter addressed to Prime Minister Imran Khan in early December following a sharp Twitter exchange between the two leaders. Following the conference Zalmay Khalilzad visited Islamabad and reportedly expressed appreciation of Pakistan's role in UAE.

Contradictory Positions and Thinking

As for the positions and thinking that have thus far challenged progress towards peace, we start with the Kabul government which conflates itself with the structures put together through the Bonn process in 2002. The government enjoys international legitimacy and maintains a semblance of modern forms of governance. But internally, the government is riven with political and ethnic dissension. It is sustained by outside, mainly American, assistance, its control beyond Kabul is tenuous and challenged by local influential, the warlords, or the Afghan Taliban and more recently also by elements claiming to be affiliated with ISIS. The most serious weakness of the Kabul government has been the absence of a viable economy and an effective national army. The economy is essentially a war economy dependent on outside funding without which, President Ashraf Ghani admitted, his government would not last more than six months. The army is unable to operate in most parts of Afghanistan without American/NATO backup and air-support. Most analysts agree that the Kabul government will not survive the exit of foreign forces from Afghanistan.

Regardless of its obvious fragility, the Kabul government insists that reconciliation must proceed within the framework of the Bonn institutions and the constitution. It is averse to making any substantive departure to accommodate the Afghan Taliban in a power-sharing arrangement. The underlying presumption is that the Coalition forces cannot afford to abandon Afghanistan and risk the loss of all that has been achieved at great cost or allow conditions for Al Qaeda type groups to once again find a safe haven. The position is similar to that of the Soviet sponsored PDPA government in the 1980s vis-a-vis the Afghan Mujahedin groups. To be fair, like the hardline Mujahedin leaders at that time, the Afghan Taliban leadership also shows little inclination towards power sharing. Compromise or power-sharing is not part of the political lexicon of hardline Islamist groups (Gulbadin Hekmatyar acquiesced in reconciliation only when armed struggle became untenable for him). Meanwhile the antagonists insist on positions that leave no room for common ground. This has always been a recipe for the continuation of the low intensity conflict. The stalemate ended in the past only when external circumstances changed drastically such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and 9/11.

The Afghan Taliban leadership, which is as fractious as the Kabul government, long demanded withdrawal of all foreign forces as a precondition for any peace negotiations. This may have been an internal compulsion to keep a united facade, nonetheless under the circumstances it could not be a serious basis for negotiations. Demand for withdrawal can be part of the negotiating process but not a precondition. For this reason, the clarification in Pakistan's position over the presence of the foreign forces sends an important message to nudge the Taliban to show seriousness about negotiations. It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the Afghan Taliban position may have evolved on this and other issues linked to peace negotiations. Their contacts with Moscow and Iran are pointers in that direction.

Another subtle signal for change is Imran Khan's openness and notable emphasis for promoting connectivity in South Asia, in particular trade, as significantly highlighted in his Kartarpur speech. Advocacy for connectivity makes little sense without overland transit trade which underscores a new level of Pakistani weariness with the Afghan conflict and realization of the economic costs of an unstable Afghanistan. This is a departure from Pakistan's obsessive concern about a two-front situation with growing Indian influence in Kabul and Indian subversion. Arguably, Pakistan should look at it positively if transit trade can reinforce India's stake in Afghanistan's stability. In short, Islamabad now understands that reconciliation rather than an elusive ascendance of the Afghan Taliban, alone can promote peace and unlock opportunities for economic progress linked to connectivity in the region. Also, working with Kabul and Washington is necessary to contain any Indian mischief from across the western border. The case for serious pressure on the Afghan Taliban for this purpose is, thus, stronger than ever before. This has been helped by the overt US outreach to the Afghan Taliban.

While calling for reconciliation, Kabul and Washington did not mean meeting the Afghan Taliban half way. For years, their objective was to militarily weaken and destroy the Afghan Taliban. They wanted Pakistan to target the Afghan Taliban. Washington accused Pakistan of duplicity and used the argument to discontinue assistance and reimbursements under the Coalition Support Fund, a bad arrangement agreed to by Pakistan in 2002 (Pakistan should have charged the US for the use of the three air bases and the ALOCs and the GLOCs, instead of receiving reimbursements for deployments along the western border). As the US officials started engaging with the Taliban, the demand has become more nuanced. It was summed up last October by the US CENTCOM Chief General Joseph Votel essentially in two points: delink the Taliban leaders from their cadres in Afghanistan, and force them to the table to participate in peace talks. Pakistan can try but to expect that Pakistan must deliver on such demands shows ignorance of the Afghan history and the demographic overlap in the bordering regions of the two countries. In the 1990s, Pakistan could hardly ever bring the Afghan Mujahedin factions and the Afghan Taliban to accept its point of view. That was the time when Pakistan enjoyed direct contacts with these parties and they depended a good deal on Pakistan's support.

Prospects for Peace

Given these complex and contradictory positions, what are the prospects for peace and stability? Can there be reconciliation? Is there common ground that holds promise for negotiations? What can be the format for negotiations and what could be the role for outside players other than the four identified parties? Have the principal parties abandoned the military option or do they still treat negotiations as tactics? Can there be any negotiations if the Afghan Taliban continue to be treated as terrorists? Many questions can be raised but few lend themselves to clear answers.

A lot can be said about the value of bilateral engagements and multilateral formats involving the principal parties, the need for avoiding the familiar blame game and for Washington and Kabul to improve relations with Islamabad and attenuate the miasma of distrust, better monitoring and coordination for preventing cross border movement by militants, helping to rebuild Afghanistan's economy and the wish list can go on. However, this article with its limited scope will attempt to briefly comment on three aspects germane to the prospects of progress towards peace. First the forthcoming presidential elections in Afghanistan and their relevance to reconciliation efforts, secondly, the issue of bringing the Kabul government and the Afghan Taliban on the table, and thirdly, the question of reduction of violence and the presence of foreign troops.

The 2014 Afghan presidential elections were, besides familiar accusations of rigging, roiled up in a squabble with ethnic undertones which led to a constitutional modification by introducing the position of Chief Executive. This time alongside the old debates, questions are being raised about postponement of elections and providing a transitional government with Taliban participation as well as retooling the Bonn structures in the interest of reconciliation. Regardless of merit in the argument, most probably inertia will prevail, and the 2019 presidential elections are unlikely to be derailed in favor of an uncharted course.

There can be no peace without talks between the Afghan factions, the Afghan Taliban and the Kabul government represented directly or through the Afghan Peace Council. To expect that the Taliban will work out an agreement with the American occupation power is denying the reality of Afghanistan and only reflects the Afghan Taliban hope in an eventual military victory. It was the Afghans themselves who had worked out the Peshawar and the Bonn accords, however flawed. Outsiders can use influence or act as guarantors, but they cannot negotiate agreements on behalf of the Afghan parties. Here Pakistan has a role to exercise whatever influence it wields to persuade the Afghan Taliban leadership to sit with Kabul on the table.

Lastly and importantly is the question of reduction of violence. This is the kernel of the beginning towards peace. The elements to be considered could include a ceasefire contingent on freezing the situation on the ground with the Afghan Taliban and the Coalition and the Afghan National Army putting a hold on military operations, release of prisoners and a clear commitment by the Afghan Taliban not to allow Al Qaeda or similar extremist groups to operate in areas under their influence. An informal or formal acceptance of the Taliban influence locally (similar to that exercised by the warlords in other sub-regions) could pave the way for power sharing in Kabul.

Such arrangements will have to be worked out by Kabul, Washington and the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan can probe Washington and Kabul about their thinking and help nudge the Afghan Taliban in that direction.

Four decades of conflict should be enough to push the Afghan factions to soften their prejudices and rigidity and explore avenues for peace. The Afghan leadership across the divide and external players must not allow the promise visible in the recent political and diplomatic activity to be lost. Otherwise the misery of the Afghan nation will persist. This was as true thirty years ago when the Soviets left Afghanistan as it is today when weariness with the conflict appears to run deep within and outside Afghanistan.