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*Session V:
Trilateral Initiatives focusing on Afghanistan:
US-China – Pakistan and Russia – China – Pakistan*

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Initiatives Focusing on Afghanistan – A Pakistani Perspective

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Since 2001, more than \$80 billion have been spent on Afghanistanⁱ yet it has not made any significant change for the better. According to a report released by the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) ‘Afghanistan is worse off today than it was before 2001.’ⁱⁱ Afghanistan continues to be confronted by violence and insecurity, weak and ineffective governance, corruption, a flourishing drug trade, and a growing Taliban insurgency which continues to escalate. Despite claims of blunting the Taliban's insurgency, the Taliban are stronger than before. They have taken more territory in Afghanistan in 2016 than at any time in their 16-year fight and have achieved military successes in Kunduz, Lashkar Gah and Tarinkot to name a few.ⁱⁱⁱ Their growing presence is one of the many indications of the growing power of the Taliban and the urgent need for a peace and reconciliation process which is currently at a standstill. Afghanistan continues to stand highly divided on the issue of the Taliban and has yet to develop national consensus, and a national narrative.^{iv} President Ghani has been unable to galvanize and win domestic support for peace talks (particularly from within his fragile government who openly oppose talks) and devise a viable national reintegration program.^v

Hence questions of uncertainty continue to revolve around the future of Afghanistan and whether enough of a state structure and institutions have been created over the past decade for the Afghan state to sustain itself. Apart from internal challenges, the presence of Daesh/ the Islamic State (IS), is another major issue of concern not only for Afghanistan but the region as a whole.

While the challenges faced by Kabul are certainly manifold and daunting, achieving national reconciliation and establishing peace with the Afghan Taliban are the most fundamental yet the most arduous tasks. Therefore, the future stability of Afghanistan primarily depends on the reconciliation process with the Afghan Taliban and its success. While a number of attempts have been made at the regional as well as international level to achieve a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, so far all attempts have failed to deliver. Hence until peace and stability is not attained, Afghanistan will continue to be an issue of concern and present challenges to the international community, the region and particularly its neighboring states, chiefly Pakistan.

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Initiatives/Processes

Concerned over growing instability in Afghanistan, a number of meetings on Afghanistan under various initiatives (international and regional) have been at play to seek a political solution to the conflict with the aim of bringing peace to Afghanistan. In this regard, several bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral and multilateral processes/initiatives were established in an attempt to promote dialogue and peace talks between Kabul and the Afghan Taliban. These include, amongst others:

The Doha Debacle 2011 -2013: With support of the US dating back to 2011, Qatar assumed the role of a mediator, and attempted to initiate peace talks between the Taliban and Afghan government. In June 2013, the effort initially led to the opening of a political office of the Afghan Taliban. Although, the main agenda behind the opening of the political office was for the purpose of peace talks, this, however, was not taken well by Kabul, as a result of which President Karzai immediately called the talks off.

Pugwash initiative May 2015: Hosted by the Pugwash Council and Qatar, the Doha talks took place on May 2-13, 2015, in Doha, between representatives of the Afghan government and Taliban.

Urumqi Talks May 2015: China with the help of Pakistan, facilitated talks between representatives of the Afghan government, headed by Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai with former Taliban officials, including Mullah Jalil, former foreign minister; Mullah Abdul Razaq, former interior minister; and Mullah Hassan Rahmani, former governor of Kandahar Province, in Urumqi, from May 21-22, 2015.^{vi}

Oslo Talks, June 2015: Talks in Doha were followed, by talks in Oslo, between a Taliban delegation led by Sohail Shaheen and the first Afghan all-female delegation headed by Shukria Barakzai, in Oslo, from June 3-4, 2015. Subsequently a second round took place in Oslo from June 16-17, 2015, between Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister, Hekmat Khalil Karzai and a Taliban delegation headed by Syed Tayeb Agha.

2+2+1 or Murree Peace Process July 2015: The first officially acknowledged round of talks between representatives of the Afghan Government and Afghan Taliban, known as the 2+2+1 or the Murree Peace Process, took place in Murree, from July 7-8, 2015, Pakistan. The Murree talks (facilitated by Pakistan, supported and attended by Chinese and the US officials who took part as observers) are believed to be a result of the talks facilitated by China in Taliban.

Heart of Asia' Ministerial Conference, December 2015: The 'Heart of Asia' ministerial conference, held in Islamabad on December 9, 2015 between Pakistan, Afghanistan, United States and China regarding a possible time frame for the

resumption of talks between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban.^{vii} The Taliban were not a part of the process.

Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), January 2016: In yet another attempt to revive the peace process between the Afghan Government and the Taliban, the first meeting of the Afghanistan Pakistan, US and China Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), was held in Islamabad on January 11, 2016. The Taliban were not a part of the process.

Russia, China and Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue on Afghanistan, December 2016: Apart from the above mentioned initiatives, the Third Trilateral Dialogue on Afghanistan was held between Russia, China and Pakistan on December 27, 2016.[†] While all three states agreed to adopt flexible measures to remove the names of certain Taliban members from the sanctions lists in order to encourage peace talks,^{viii} the Taliban however, were not a part of the process.

US, India, and Afghanistan Trilateral, September 2016: At the same time, the United States, India, and Afghanistan held the first ever trilateral meeting in New York on Afghanistan. The Taliban were not included.

Moscow six part talks, April 2017: After a lull in talks, the Moscow six part talks were held on April 14, 2017, between Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, India, Iran and Central Asian nations in an effort to revive peace efforts. The Taliban were not included.

Kabul peace process, June 2017: The first Afghan owned and led initiative took place in Kabul on June 6, 2017, between the Afghan government and more than 20 countries (Pakistan, China, Iran, Russia, India, Saudi Arabia, the US and various European countries) which, according to Kabul, is a result of the failure of several “bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral and multilateral” attempts (including the recently held Moscow initiative) to initiate peace talks with the Afghan Taliban.^{ix} Unsurprisingly, the Afghan Taliban were not invited to take part.

[†]The first Russia, China and Pakistan Trilateral was held in Beijing in April, 2013, followed by the second round on November 20, 2013.

Reasons for failure

While a number of initiatives, aiming at achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan have been initiated, so far none have been able to deliver, and failure can be attributed to four broad reasons:

- Ambiguity of intent
- Pak-Afghan mistrust
- Excluding the Taliban
- Multiplicity of process - lack of coordination

Ambiguity of intent - unwillingness of certain elements to pursue peace talks

Every time a breakthrough in talks with the Taliban is eminent, the process has been jeopardised, be it the case of the opening of the political office of the Taliban in Qatar, the Murree process or Mullah Mansoor's death, in what has become a repeated pattern over the last few years. This was first witnessed in the Murree peace process, the first officially acknowledged round of talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. While the talks ended with immense optimism, the disclosure of Mullah Omar's demise by Afghan authorities in late July 2015, just before the second round of talks scheduled for July 31, 2015, led to the suspension of the talks. Similarly, it has been learnt that Mullah Mansoor had agreed to join peace talks but was targeted by a US drone strike before he could make the announcement.^x

Hence in both circumstances, one cannot but question the relevance of the disclosure of Mullah Omar's death as well as the killing of Mullah Mansoor at such decisive moments in the peace process. It is clearly evident that a deliberate effort is at play on the part of certain quarters within and outside Kabul that are trying to disrupt the peace process. There is no doubt that Afghanistan stands highly divided on the issue of pursuing peace with the Taliban. Kabul has yet to develop national consensus as well as a national narrative, as many within Ghani's fragile administration strongly oppose the inclusion of the Taliban in the political process^{xi}, let alone share power with the group. If a compromise is achieved with the Taliban, the group will have to be accommodated politically, and one questions whether those in control are willing to share power along with resources? Hence beneficiaries of the current status quo will continue to use and justify violence to maintain their positions. Hence, political and national reconciliation continue to be major a hurdle in pursuing

peace talks with the Taliban. President Ghani, like his predecessor, has failed to bring stability to the country or make headway with the Afghan Taliban. Hence in this regard, it is time for the Afghan leadership to take ownership of the responsibilities as well as failures in Afghanistan, including the peace process. Establishing talks with the Taliban and finding a plausible solution to the conflict is an Afghan prerogative and responsibility. Thus the process need to be essentially intra-Afghan, Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

Pak-Afghan mistrust

Kabul's stance regarding Islamabad's role in Afghanistan as well as the peace process has been characterized by ambiguity, suspicion and contradictions. Afghan authorities blame Pakistan for supporting the Taliban, yet they continue to solicit Pakistan to play a role in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. Due to continuous allegations levelled against Pakistan of interference, initially Islamabad limited its participation to only support the peace process. However, President Ghani persistently insisted that Pakistan should play a bigger role and facilitate talks with the Afghan Taliban. Hence, at the behest of the Afghan government, Islamabad used whatever influence it had with the Afghan Taliban to persuade them to engage with Kabul as was exemplified in the talks at Doha, Oslo and the Murree Peace Process. Although Afghanistan had welcomed Pakistan's efforts in 'paving the ground for peace and reconciliation'^{xii}, Kabul continues to doubt Pakistan's sincerity and has unrealistic expectations which are not based on ground realities and conceivable expectations.

Afghan authorities need to realize that Pakistan can only do so much. Blaming Pakistan will certainly not deliver the Taliban let alone the peace process. Kabul must understand that Pakistan's role is only limited to supporting the peace process, reaching out and reconciling with the Taliban is a matter of Afghan prerogative and consensus.

However at the same time, unless and until Kabul and Islamabad do not move beyond their current state of relations, which are trapped in a downward spiral of antagonism and mistrust, due to unfulfilled expectations, counter-terrorism differences, reignited border disputes, and failure of the peace talks, no headway can be made in the Afghan peace process. While the peace process is an important factor in improving Pak-Afghan ties, it should not be the sole factor. The outcome of the peace talks should not govern and determine Afghanistan's relationship with Pakistan. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan must keep the gains they have made in their fragile relationship independent of the peace process. Continuing violence on the part of the Taliban and the slow progress on peace talks must not be allowed to hamper

improvement in bilateral ties. In fact it would be prudent for President Ghani to accept Islamabad's overtures (for mending ties and support for the peace process) and implement what he defended a few years ago - that "Pakistan's cooperation is key to the peace process, and trust among Pakistan and Afghanistan for combating terrorism is a key element to end the undeclared war between Afghanistan and Pakistan." ^{xiii}

Excluding the Taliban.

While a number of processes have been initiated to find a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan, all have subsequently failed to deliver due to the exclusion of the Taliban - one of the most important components to end the Afghan stalemate. Hence until the Taliban are not recognized, taken on board and involved in constructive engagement and dialogue, hopes for peace and stability remain elusive. A political solution is the only solution to end the Afghan crisis, which cannot be achieved without the Taliban, hence excluding them is counterproductive and jeopardizes any chances of bringing stability in Afghanistan.

Kabul must move beyond giving statements and instead focus on galvanizing domestic support from forces opposed to the peace process. It not only has to convince the Taliban to enter into talks but must also accommodate them in the political process through a holistic and viable national reintegration program that is acceptable to all.

In short a common ground needs to be agreed upon that accommodates the interests of the Afghan government as well as the Taliban. A political solution is the only solution to end the Afghan crisis, which cannot be achieved without establishing peace with the Taliban through constructive engagement and dialogue. At the same time, the Taliban too, must ensure a visible reduction in their attacks against the state. While the group continues to justify its ongoing offensive to "liberate Afghanistan from foreign control"^{xiv} it is no longer advisable for them to do so as they are no longer fighting a foreign enemy.^{xv} Additionally, with changing regional dynamics and threat of the IS, the Taliban knows that they cannot operate in complete isolation and, therefore, they will have to eventually reach a political compromise with the government.

Hence, for any process to succeed, all sides will have to display immense patience, maturity and openness to accommodate each other's views. In short, both principal stake holders, the Afghan government and Taliban will have to move beyond the rhetoric, find the middle ground and be willing to compromise on their initial and maximalist positions. Until then, the chances of peace and stability in Afghanistan remain elusive to say the least.

Multiplicity of process and lack of coordination

There is only one path to attaining peace and stability in Afghanistan which is through Kabul between the two principle stakeholders, namely the Afghan government and Taliban. Hence multiple processes and lack of coordination, with little clarity of the authority of one process over the other further complicates the already complex state of affairs in Afghanistan. Hence there must be an overall commitment (on the part of all stakeholders) to follow and implement one workable solution (process) instead of multiple/ simultaneous and at times contradictory initiatives, as one has seen in the past i.e. US, India, and Afghanistan Trilateral which took place in September 2016, and was followed by the Trilateral between Russia, China and Pakistan in December 2016.

In this regard, the initiation of the Kabul Process, on June 6, 2017, by the Afghan government marked the beginning of the first Afghan owned and led initiative to “build regional security alliances to counter the threat of terrorism and revive the peace process.”^{xvi} The process is a welcoming development and step in the right direction which, according to Kabul, is a result of the failure of several “bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral and multilateral” attempts to initiate peace talks with the Afghan Taliban.^{xvii} The move is a clear indication of Kabul’s growing assertion of resolving its issues unilaterally and a visible sign of its tendencies towards independent policy decisions, while at the same time reducing its dependence on key regional participation. Hence, if this is the course of action Kabul intends to follow, the international community and regional countries must extend full support to the process to make it successful. However at the same time, by doing so, the Afghan state also needs to take ownership of the responsibilities and failures associated with the peace process, instead of shifting the blame. Talking to the Taliban and finding a plausible solution to the conflict is an Afghan prerogative and responsibility. It is for the Afghan leadership to determine how and when to proceed with the peace process. Subsequently, whatever outcome is achieved in the peace process (if at all) should be solely Afghan owned.

Despite President Ghani's renewed call for peace talks with the Taliban at a mutually agreeable location, and assurance that the group would eventually be allowed to open a representative office if significant progress was achieved, the Taliban were not a part of the Kabul process. While the Kabul initiative may have raised hopes of the possibility of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, in the larger context, it appears that this initiative, like previous ones, will not bare any results until the Taliban are taken on board and included in the process. A political solution is the only solution to end the Afghan crisis, which cannot be achieved

without establishing peace with the Taliban through constructive engagement and dialogue.

Way Forward:

Regional Approach (Immediate neighbors)

Geopolitical realities are not the same as they used to be. Regional dynamics have changed. There are now more players and new actors that have taken center stage with new realities (regional instability, transnational terrorism, presence of Islamic State, to name a few). Afghanistan and her immediate neighbors (Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia and the Central Asian nations) need to realize that the region can no longer depend on the international community to bail it out. It is time for them to take ownership and fend for themselves by overcoming their differences, trust deficit, and build positive relations and a common vision for a strong, enduring and comprehensive partnership. Hence in order to achieve this the following approaches need to be adopted;

Bilateral Approach:

As a starter, a bilateral approach needs to be initiated between Afghanistan and Pakistan with the aim of resuming ties as well as the peace process. Unless and until Kabul and Islamabad do not move beyond and their current state of tense ties, no headway can be made in the Afghan peace process. For this, the vicious blame game and mistrust of the past must not be allowed to resurface. While the peace process is an important factor in improving Pak-Afghan ties, it should not be the sole factor. The Afghan state needs to take ownership of its own responsibilities and failures, as does Pakistan. Kabul's expectations from Islamabad must be realistic and based on ground realities. Similarly, Islamabad should only make promises it can keep. Both countries need to define the parameters of their bilateral relationship by working further to overcome differences between the two states. As a starter, they could focus on the possible resumption of talks for the revival of the MoU signed between their respective intelligence agencies back in 2015, with the aim of building trust and confidence.

QCG +1 (Taliban)

Following a possible resumption in Pak-Afghan ties, a QCG +1 model should be adopted, which includes all Quadrilateral Coordination Group members (the Afghan government, Pakistan, US and China) with the inclusion of the +1 (Afghan Taliban). The Quadrilateral Coordination group is a good initiative and is the first of its kind, which includes principle stakeholders, Afghan government, Pakistan US and China. The presence of the US and China has not only added credence to the process but has generated immense hope and confidence that the mechanism would be able to develop a roadmap for engagement between the representatives of the Afghan government and Taliban. While traditionally, China has maintained a limited role in Afghanistan, its close ties with Pakistan, neutrality and recent economic investments in Afghanistan, paves the way for China to play a bigger and far more active role in Afghanistan, by helping to resume talks between Pakistan and Afghanistan as well as facilitate peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban. Hence with the inclusion of the Taliban, the most important component of the process, the QCG +1 will be more plausible on many counts and may actually present an opportunity for a negotiated settlement.

QCG + 1(Taliban) +3 (Iran, Russia, CARs)

Once the QCG+1(Taliban) starts moving towards achieving tangible confidence building measures and verifiable confidence on all sides, this mechanism should be expanded into a multi-platform initiative to include QCG +1 (Taliban) +3 (Iran, Russia and Central Asian States). It is important to highlight that Afghanistan's neighbors face similar challenges from the ongoing unrest in Afghanistan be it insecurity and instability emanating from their border with Afghanistan, the threat of terrorism, presence of IS, drugs, smuggling etc. Hence, Afghanistan's immediate neighbors, which include Iran, Russia and the Central Asian States have a pivotal role to play in the future of Afghanistan. Subsequently, despite their previous differences and diverging interests, it appears that, for the first time, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, and the Central Asian nations seem to be on the same page and have a common (regional) vision for the future of Afghanistan which entails a more prominent regional role, recognition of the Afghan Taliban as an essential component of the peace process, fighting the Daesh as well as bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan. Hence all the more reason for a regional approach that includes Afghanistan's immediate neighbors. Yet, Iran and Russia's growing interest and involvement in the peace process (acknowledgement of the Afghan Taliban) has been questioned and looked upon with suspicion by the international community. However

the international community must realize that regional states have far more to gain from a negotiated settlement between Kabul and the Taliban which will ensure a stable Afghanistan, the elimination of the IS and an overall stable region. Hence, regional countries particularly Afghanistan's immediate neighbors should collaborate their efforts and be supported by the international community to play a bigger role and push for peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban.

Multilateral:

The QCG + 1(Taliban) +3 (Iran, Russia, CARs) can then further be expanded to include the European Union, India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE as well as members of the Heart of Asia process.

Conclusion

For any process to succeed in Afghanistan, be it trilateral, quadrilateral, or multilateral, there needs to be collective willingness on the Afghan side to acknowledge the Afghan Taliban as a legitimate stakeholder and a national willingness to accommodate them in the political process/future of Afghanistan. The initiative needs to be Afghan owned and supported by the international and regional stakeholders. A regional approach needs to be adopted, and regional rivalries need to be buried, in particular both Pakistan and Afghanistan need to move beyond the past and adopt a pragmatic and holistic approach to address the key irritants in their strained relationship, with the aim to find solutions that addresses their concerns and maximizes their interests. Subsequently, all principal stakeholders will have to display immense patience, maturity and openness to accommodate each other's interests, otherwise any initiative will be an exercise in futility.

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