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Received:
December 27,
2022

Revised:
February 19,
2023

Published:
June 10, 2023

Journal of Politics and International Studies

Vol. 9, No. 1, January–June 2023, pp.83–90

The Decisive Role Of Pakistan In The Afghan Peace Process

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Abstract

Peace in Afghanistan is directly linked to peace in Pakistan because any unrest in the neighboring country could impact the demographic changes in the other neighboring state. The success of the peace process would be more dynamic and quicker if the Afghans themselves could understand their issues and challenges more conveniently than foreigners. The term "The new Afghan Strategy" by US President Donald Trump has put the role of Pakistan as pivotal. The US admits to influencing the Taliban for talks through military pressures under the direction of the new policy. However, the Trump administration was more practical and hopeful of the success of the negotiation talks. The ongoing violent activities by the Taliban in Afghanistan have wasted all the efforts of sober stakeholders.

Key Words: Afghan peace strategy, Taliban, Quadrilateral Coordination Group, Foreign intervention

Introduction

The people of Afghanistan have remained the victim of foreign occupation, internal strife, terrorism, ethnic tension, and economic depravity; therefore, it is the need of the hour to bring lasting and durable peace to the land of Afghanistan. Further, peace in Afghanistan is directly linked to peace in Pakistan because any unrest in the neighboring country could impact the demographic changes in the other neighboring state. For that reason, it became essential for some firm peace initiative where the people of Afghanistan could feel a sense of satisfaction by securing a viable constitutional government. Therefore, Pakistan, an imperative neighbour of Afghanistan, could play a vital role by facilitating peace. It is important to mention that both the Afghan government and the US wanted Pakistan to influence the Taliban for the negotiation over the future of Afghanistan

because Pakistan reportedly had clandestine connections with the Taliban (Zikrya Khan, 2019).

Initiation of Peace Efforts among the Key Stakeholders

The approach of Afghanistan and the US to Pakistan for peace efforts will become optimistic only when the US commitments materialize if the US administration reduces the number of foreign troops, either the US or NATO. The feasible entrance of the Taliban into the mainstream politics of Afghanistan was directly linked to key security concerns. For instance, introducing a lenient constitutional government structure, a convenient power-sharing concept, and equal participation of all groups in the governmental process could increase the chances of peace initiatives in Afghanistan (Kramer, 2018). However, there were some huge concerns among the scholars and governmental policy maker of stakeholders that if feasible space is not given to any internal stakeholders in the government representation, such as warlords, the insurgents, the Taliban and other ethnic groups then the US withdrawal from Afghanistan would not only exacerbate the situation but it would add more fuel to fire. As a consequence, the peace of the region would be terminated and a state of disorder, violence and confusion would make its way. Therefore, before the peace initiative negotiations begins, it was necessary to incorporate all kinds of groups for the validity of the process. Otherwise, it will create civil strife and no other would welcome it, especially Pakistan, if there is no agreed peace settlement among concerned groups. In fact, Pakistan desired to play its middle role as a mediator to both internal and external stakeholders. The experts sitting in Islamabad believe that the success of the Afghani peace process would be more dynamic and quicker if it is carried by Afghans themselves because they could understand their issues and challenges more conveniently than foreigners.

The New Afghan Peace Strategy

The US, since a long time, had been demanding, again and again, to do more against the Taliban and their facilitator; and take some formidable actions to prevent them. While on the other hand, when atmosphere could not tolerate according to the US perspective, the US asked Pakistan to play its key in influencing the Taliban for the peace process. The term “the new Afghan Strategy” by the US president Donald Trump put the role of Pakistan as a pivotal, while mentioning that this could be successful if Pakistan take sever actions against their sanctuaries. The US admits of influencing the Taliban for talks through the military pressures, under the directions of new policy. However, the Trump administration seemed to be more practical and hopeful of the successful of the negotiation talks. It is needed to mention that a peace effort starts by the Trump administration to end the protracted war in Afghanistan. Therefore, it established Afghan Peace Process and appointed the Zalmay Khalilzad, its special envoy and lead negotiator of the Afghan peace process.

However, the special envoy was facing a hurdle how to engage the insurgents or the Taliban for the peace talks. Moreover, the US placed a peace talks its upper priority and it hopeful that it will successfully engage the Taliban in a flexible deal by September 2019. On the contrary, the ongoing violent activities by the Taliban in Afghanistan have wasted all the efforts of sober stakeholders. Contrarily, Islamabad often stated that “Pakistan’s leverage over the Taliban had declined due to different governmental actions such as labelling Taliban affiliates as terrorists and banning them. But the US denied this by putting so long as the Taliban leadership is inclined towards Pakistan, Islamabad would retain influence upon them. If Pakistan’s position convinces the US and its role in instilling peace in the war-torn country, it will be a beneficial deal for Islamabad. On the contrary, the

presence of Taliban leadership in Pakistan and their support looked like a puzzle Pakistan has never denied. US President Trump asked Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan to mediate the peace negotiations. Pakistan can improve its regional posture and reputation through sincere efforts to bring the Taliban to a meaningful dialogue process, including all Afghan internal and external stakeholders (Muhammad Idrees, *Afghan Peace Process and the Role of Pakistan in Engaging the Stakeholders*, 2019)." However, a question is raised here: the US, on the one side, ask to make a deal with the Taliban while on the other side, it takes military action against it, along with also asking Pakistan to take some stern military action.

After the suspension of a peace dialogue by the US due to the Taliban's violent activities, a new deadline would be expected for the continuation of peace talks. On the other side, the Taliban do not want to engage in any peace deal until the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghan soil because they consider the Afghan government a tool of foreigners. However, according to official sources, the US was considering withdrawing its forces, not entirely but a more significant number of troops. The origins of the Taliban claimed that "they, unlike the past, did not want a monopoly of power, because acquiring the whole country by force will not bring peace and stability. Taliban did not want a complete military victory. Still, they wanted to find a solution through peaceful means and dialogue, with the aim that once the foreign forces are withdrawn, there should be no intra-Afghan conflict so that a long-term peace could be established." For that reason, it gave a green light from the Taliban that they completely want a peaceful Afghanistan and are willing to provide a power-sharing system in future of Afghanistan, which must be welcomed.

The Pledge made by Pakistan to the Afghan Peace Initiative

A peaceful Afghanistan is in the more significant interest of Pakistan; therefore, Pakistan also wants the self-government of Afghanistan, where all issues and challenges should be addressed collectively. Due to these reasons, Pakistan fully supported all the stakeholders for the peace and prosperity of the region because the states within the radius of conflicted Afghanistan were at high risk of pernicious. Further, the conflict and unrest are not in the interest of any stakeholder. Therefore, Pakistan, without any pressure, supports this effort. The foreign minister of Pakistan, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, said that "instability in Afghanistan is impacting both Islamabad and Kabul. Moreover, Afghanistan could benefit from multiple billion dollars project of the transit trade in the region." (Watkins, 2022).

Further, Pakistan has made a firm commitment to the peace process because Pakistan has initiated the multibillion-dollar project of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with China, and it will not want to destabilize its CPEC. As "the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has aimed to provide the facility of transit trade to China, Afghanistan, and Central Asian Republics (CARs) would only be possible if there is peace and harmony in Afghanistan." (Waseem, 2021). Therefore, there was an urgent need to increase regional harmony among the states of SAARC countries for the betterment of the region and, particularly, for Afghanistan. By increasing the interdependence, states would intentionally avoid engaging themselves in conflicts. Consequently, this kind of interdependence would assist Afghanistan in sustaining its economy on the long terms. War is not in the interest of anyone; instead, it will intensify the conflict. Owing to these concerns, Pakistan pledged to make lasting peace between the major stakeholders to liberate Afghanistan from the conflicts.

Peace Talks with Taliban

The primary concern for the Afghan government and the special envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, was making a peace talk with the Taliban because they considered it a significant challenge for themselves. In this scenario, the role of Pakistan was vital and imperative because only Pakistan has the capacity to arrange peace talks due to its clandestine contact with the Taliban. Therefore, Pakistan had endeavoured to convince the Taliban leadership by creating a broad perception that the protracted violence was not in the interest of any party. Rather it will intensify the already aggrieved situation. For a better and prosperous Afghanistan, all members must make a strong commitment to avoid using deliberate force. Moreover, to win the confidence of each others, both have to show some peaceful gesture. So, the release of senior leadership of Taliban from the Bagram prison was of significance which augments the confidence and trust of Taliban. On this reaction, the Taliban release the three Indian engineers from its custody to increase the mutual trust. As a consequence, Pakistan considers these kinds of initiatives as a peaceful gesture which will, ultimately, lead towards the peace. On account of above reasons, the role Pakistan was of utmost significance which manifests the links of Pakistan with Taliban to cajole them for peace efforts which are commendable moves. However, the relations were relaxed between Islamabad and Kabul due to remarks Prime Minister Imran Khan over the Interim Government of Afghanistan.

Regardless of these incidents, the relations were normalized and the US appreciated the role of Pakistan in establishing the peace efforts among the stakeholders. Moreover, the Pakistani authorities sitting in Islamabad also guaranteed to play a pragmatic role in this process for the interest of the Afghanistan and the region. The Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Shah Mahmood Qureshi in its statement said that “Our country is resolute towards finding a reliable solution to the conflict because Pakistan wants Afghanistan at peace with itself. The country would continue to facilitate the process yet it supports politically negotiated intra-Afghan solution to the problem.” All stakeholders were asking Pakistan to play its role because, in fact, Pakistan has a considerable influence over the leadership of Taliban due to its chronically records of post Soviet Union invasion. Besides it, the President of the Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, attended a seminar in Pakistan where he stated that “recognizing all important things we must work on programmatic approaches moving from conflict to cooperation. Pakistan’s role as a facilitator of the US-Taliban dialogue and her overall performance has also been praised.” (Ram, 2008)The Trump administration also lauded the capabilities and determinants of Pakistan; above all, the US also invited the Prime Minister of Pakistan to visit US as a peaceful and optimistic gesture.

Efforts made by Pakistan to other concerned States for Afghan Peace Process

Multiple official forums suggested that the major foreign actors should be Pakistan, US, China and Russia. The incorporation of India in this process is at risk because India had restricted itself by not joining this dialogue. Further, the incorporation of Iran in this dialogue was also in halt because of the on-going US-Iran clashes due to some recent political developments in the global political atmosphere. However, India’s representation in the peace conference held by Russia as a non-official delegate expressed that “India was following a policy of supporting a solution to the conflict which would be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan controlled including the Afghan government. The perceived hasty withdrawal of foreign forces and quickness in the peace process by the US and Russia to end Muhammad the long-lasting conflict has left India in a quandary. India has long been suspicious about the Taliban return to power in Kabul because she fears that under such a scenario the militants may invariably shift their ground

to India and Indian occupied Kashmir. India's reluctance to engage with Taliban not only jeopardizes its long-term interests in the country but also puts it at odd with the world community." (Ashutosh Misra, *Pakistan's Stability Paradox: Domestic, Regional and International Dimensions*, 2017)

In 2018 of Tashkent agreement (Sattar, *Pakistan's Foreign Policy, 1947-2019, 2020*), India was the signatory where the peace process was initiated. However, this agreement did not integrate Taliban and India directly in this peace process. Contemporary, Taliban are enjoying good relations with its like-minded states and, so, they are not facing any kind of quarantine. They have established their diplomatic officer in the Qatar where they are multiplying their diplomatic relation with its predecessor rivals, for instance, India, China, Iran and Russia who were against their existence since the Soviet withdrawal. However, with the changing geopolitics of the globalized world, Iran urged to construct its relations with the Taliban leadership despite difference of its theocratic ideology. Therefore, multiple peace negotiations were held with the Iranian officials regarding the peace process. Due to its lasting effort, Iran had played a vital role in this process of peace. Moreover, Iran also wanted to build relation with Taliban to downgrade its rival, the US, because in the international politics 'enemy's enemy is considers as a friend.' On account of that reason, multiple rounds of negotiation were held in the Iranian capital, Tehran during the foreign troops withdrawal rumors. The US wanted a readily exit from the US especially Trump administration to yield some sort of political objective. Further, this administration has also made some discriminatory moves for instance, "withdrawal from Iran's nuclear deal, cancelling the Paris Climate Change Agreement and decision to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to the Jerusalem." (Pandey, 2019) The mature politicians of the Awami National Party also suggested that all the dynamic stakeholders must be incorporated for the success of Afghan Peace Process. Moreover, Campbell in his statement, he said that "I think Afghanistan, I think China, I think the United States, I think many countries can do to encourage the Taliban to come to the negotiating table, I think the peace process has to end up at some point in time. Thus, all stakeholders must play a constructive role pushing aside their lofty ambitions of downplaying each other think Afghanistan, I think China, I think the United States, I think many countries can do to encourage the Taliban to come to the negotiating table, I think the peace process has to end up at some point in time," said Campbell. Thus, all active stakeholders had played a constructive role pushing aside their lofty ambitions of downplaying each other." (Sadry, 2018)

Indeed, it was the need of the time to find a protracted and pragmatic peace in the region by integrating all the regional countries such as China, Iran, and Russia also. On the contrary, the thirst for power was undermining the peace of region between the US and Russia due to their clashing ideologies. The author opined that "The blame game between Kabul and Islamabad combined with trust deficit between the US and Russia, and the US and Iran has prompted them to talk on their own who has led to nowhere. Meanwhile, Kabul's ties with its neighbors such as China, Iran, and Pakistan, are still weighed down heavily by security-related issues, including; the smuggling of illicit goods and services; cross-border terrorism, and; the consequent threats to the safety of foreign citizens residing in and traveling to Afghanistan." (Kramer, 2018)

Pakistan's Efforts to Inveigling China

The nexus between Pakistan and China is considered as all-weathered due to their candid chronic record. However, on the issue of Afghanistan, the efforts of Pakistan in persuading China for the prosperous and peaceful Afghanistan seemed sober. Both are the ardent supporters of unity and amity in the region. Both states were also persuading the Taliban for the peace talks. For these reasons, China

backed the Kabul government at all levels for the benefits of Asia because, by having a stable Afghanistan it could benefit China to expand its silk route-One Belt One Road. A senior professor of the Chinese University, Dr Zeng, stated that “he does not think China being able to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table, but Pakistan has leverage over the Taliban. Therefore, the Kabul government called upon China and Pakistan to become partners in the peace process. The Chinese government welcomes all regional and international peace-building efforts and counterinsurgency.” (Sabit, 2019).

In this context, China was playing a dynamic role for peace at the diplomatic and political level. Besides, China had initiated multiple plans to counter the violence in the region such as the brain mind of SCO is China and it wants to counter the spread of terrorism. Further, China had also launched the “Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) to countering terrorism have been highly appraised.”(Rahil majeed Lone, 2018) As mentioned earlier, Chinese investment is also imperative for Afghanistan and central Asian region due to its Belt and Road initiative project which aims at connecting the whole through a single road. Due to huge investment in this project, not only Afghanistan but the whole region would get the benefit of it, economically and politically. Therefore, the BRI project is significant in this region but only on one condition if there is lasting peace. The unstable region would not attract any investment in the area and people would die of hunger and violence. In the last few years, after the Russian meeting in Moscow, China has developed its relations with the Taliban with the blessings of Pakistan’s efforts. On the contrary, “effects of the US-led war or terror has generally overshadowed many attempts by its neighbours to meaningfully engage in a major trade, investment and development related activities.” (Muhammad Idrees, Afghan Peace Process and the Role of Pakistan in Engaging the Stakeholders, 2019)

Status of Russia in the Afghan Peace Process and Pakistan

Historically, both Pakistan and Russia have relations of ups and down from time to time according to geopolitics. Regardless of it, Pakistan inveigled the role of Russia in the peace process in this peace process because its participation was as necessary as that of the US. Therefore, Pakistan appreciated the role of Russia in these peace efforts. The absence of Russia in this process can create a wide gap.(Idrees, 2016) So, Pakistan viewed it as a significant power in the region which could play its role effectively. The Foreign Office of Pakistan had expressed that Pakistan has committed to “work with Russia on their format of a peace deal agreed upon during the meeting of Pakistan’s Foreign Minister and Russian envoy last month (February 2019).” Last November 2019, Russia organized a meeting with China and Iran. Pakistan also participated in this conference and took this matter into its consideration. However, this meeting was not successful but it provided some opportunities. On account of these reasons, multiple intellectuals present their views regarding Afghanistan and its concerned stakeholders “such as Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, and the CARs, that the region can no longer solely depend on the international community, and that it is time for them to take ownership of the region and fend for themselves by overcoming their differences, build positive relations and a common vision for the region, and more so, for Afghanistan.” (Sattar, Pakistan's Foreign Policy, 1947-2019, 2020).

In this peace process, Russia also lauded the role of Pakistan, which Pakistan is playing tirelessly. The observers based in the US stated that “Pakistan’s role in the process up to the extent to influence the group to stay connected with US officials in Doha. They envisaged the Prime Minister Imran Khan’s visit to Washington nothing more than Pakistan’s support for the peace process.” (Anna Larson, 2018) Due to the fact, the role of Pakistan in terms of Russia was also admirable because

the success of the Afghan Peace Process is a ‘hallmark achievement’ of the Pakistan’s pragmatic foreign policy where they are sending a message to the world that Pakistan wants a peace in the region because of its peaceful efforts. The contribution of Pakistan to engaging the Russian officials in this process manifested the optimistic role of Pakistan in the peace initiative efforts for Afghanistan. Mr Kabulov, a Russian envoy to Afghanistan, expressed the romantic nexus of both states Pakistan and Russia that “both are important partners to the peace process and stability of Afghanistan.”

The Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG)

This group (Quadrilateral Coordination Group) was established in 2015 with the purpose of persuading peace process with hostile groups. The word quad means four which incorporated four geo-strategically dynamic countries in this group: Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and the US. Here, the distinguished author held that when Mullah Mansoor died “due to the drone strike against the Taliban leader in the Balochistan province of Pakistan before the second round of talks with the Taliban created mistrust between Pakistan and the US. Thus, the incident sabotaged the second round of the process with the Taliban. While the QCG referred to the violence continuing amid the process urged for direct talks between the government and the Taliban.” (State, 2022) Owing to these concerns, the gesture appeased the Kabul government and stated that peace talks with the group of insurgents might possible. On the contrary, due to great loss to the Taliban leaders, they played a pessimistic role in this peace process.

The intellectuals and scholars stated that peace in this region was the need of the time, and all stakeholders must incorporate their optimistic and pragmatic role in this effort. However, the dual policy of the US where on one side the United States wanted a wave of peace while on the other side it kept targeting the Taliban leadership. Moreover, the Taliban leaders showed a pragmatic role in this scenario and avoided violence across the region. Incorporating the US, China, Russia and Pakistan could play a strategic role in avoiding protracted conflict, ultimately ensuring peace. The role of QCG and the efforts of Pakistan were laudable. In fact, many scholars feared that the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan could augment the fire of violence because civil war could make its way. Regardless of all these factors, Afghanistan could become prosperous and leniently avoid civil war or other conflicts if a constitutionally and democratically judicious government was installed where all kinds of ethnic tribes represent their people.

Conclusion

Pakistan very efficiently engaged all the concerned stakeholders in this peace agreement. Therefore, Pakistan fully supported it, and the US appreciated Pakistan’s role in this peace dialogue. Pakistan played as a mediator between the Taliban and Afghanistan. Besides it, Pakistan also successfully engaged China, Russia and Iran to support the peace dialogue. Despite negative comments by Ashraf Ghani in the ‘Heart of Asia Conference’ (Dawn, Ghani, Modi lash out at Pakistan on terrorism at Heart of Asia moot in Amritsar, 2016), Pakistan did not boycott the dialogue and optimistically supported it. Consequently, durable peace was needed to prevent the precious lives of foreign soldiers and Afghan nationals because peace in Afghanistan is peace in South Asia.

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