

THE WAY FORWARD FOR A REGIONAL DIPLOMACY FOR PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

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INTRODUCTION

The Biden Administration has said to be reviewing the February 2020 US-Taliban agreement, indicating a delay in the complete withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. A United States' congressionally-mandated Afghanistan Study Group has advised the Biden Administration to postpone troops' withdrawal until circumstances with respect to the Taliban's commitment to peace talks improve.[1] On the ground, Taliban violence has stayed steadily high, accompanied by target killings of civil society, government employees and media activists in the big cities across Afghanistan, creating an unprecedented climate of fear in the country. While the likely US and NATO engagement beyond the May 2021 deadline (as set in the Doha Agreement between the US and the Taliban) offers some assurances, fears of a state collapse similar to that of 1992, and consequently, backslide into civil war is mounting among the population and the observers alike.

The volatility of the situation is undeniably real and impossible to ignore. However, as serious as threats of state collapse and descent into civil war are, they are also preventable. A condition-based withdrawal of the US and NATO troops is a critical aspect of it. However, military engagement can only prolong the war and suffering in Afghanistan if not combined with intensified diplomatic effort, particularly among key regional players and the US. It is also likely to further complicate the regional security dynamics amid the existing opposition to the US's long term military presence in Afghanistan.

This paper presents a discussion on the regional dynamics concerning peace in Afghanistan and a set of recommendations that could be beneficial in revitalising cooperative and constructive regional engagement to support a lasting peace in Afghanistan.

THE STATE OF REGIONAL PEACE DIPLOMACY

In the period leading up to the conclusion of the Doha Agreement between the US and the Taliban, much of the regional diplomacy concerning peace in Afghanistan was led by the US, which included both bilateral talks with countries in the region and informal great power consultations involving China and Russia. Given its critical role in the peace and conflict in Afghanistan, Pakistan has also been part of the US-China-Russia dialogues. However, a coherent and cooperative regional framework to sustain regional consultation and consensus-building regarding peace in Afghanistan has been non-existent. With talks in Doha between the Taliban and the Afghan government representatives stalled as the Biden Administration is reviewing its strategy in Afghanistan, active regional diplomacy and leadership are also absent among countries of the region. Regional powers such as China and Russia have avoided taking up leadership roles and responsibilities in Afghanistan due to various concerns, including the fear of being dragged into the conflict. In addition to having a bad experience, Russia does not have the resources for regional leadership in Afghanistan. In its turn, China lacks the required incentive, ambition and experience for such a role despite its resources and growing diplomatic clout in the region.

Together, however, Russia and China could potentially fill the gap for regional leadership, particularly within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes all of Afghanistan's critical neighbours, including Iran as an observer as well as Afghanistan itself. A formula such as SCO+2 dialogues to include the US and the European Union (EU) could offer the best hope for inclusive regional diplomacy to support peace in Afghanistan. But for it to work, a regional consensus on the future of Afghanistan, including its strategic alignment between countries of the region, the US, and Afghanistan, is fundamental. Such a consensus is difficult to realise amid the existing global and regional rivalries and divergent views about Afghanistan. But it is not impossible. Both Russia and China have demonstrated willingness to work with the US within Troika and Troika+ frameworks, indicating that they do prefer working with the US as opposed to taking up leadership roles and responsibility in Afghanistan.

While regional powers such as China and Russia want to work with the US in Afghanistan, they do not always want it at the US's initiative. For Russia, being recognized as a great power is very important even though it does not pursue a great power managerial responsibility and leadership role in Afghanistan. Russia has been projecting its great power status *vis-a-vis* Afghanistan's peace process in the context of its own initiatives such as the Moscow Format to host several meetings and conferences on peace in Afghanistan over the last years, including hosting meetings with the Taliban and other Afghan political circles. Moscow recently hosted another of Taliban delegations after the group abandoned talks in Doha in response to the USA's announcement to review the Doha deal.

Moreover, Russian Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, recently announced that Russia was planning a regional conference on Afghanistan to be held soon among countries of the region.[2] This indicates that peace in Afghanistan is also a matter of great power posturing for Russia for which it needs recognition, particularly from the US. Russia's status was undermined when the US formed the Quadrilateral Coordination Group for the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation process back in 2015. The Group included Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the US but excluded Russia. In response, Moscow expanded its contacts with the Taliban, particularly in the context of the deteriorating security situation in the north of Afghanistan after 2014, which Russia believed was assisted by the US forces.[3] These incidents complicated Russia's relationship with the Afghan government and the US in Afghanistan and shaped a pivotal moment in Russia's policy shift towards Afghanistan post-2001.

Russia's posture *vis-a-vis* the Afghan peace process is two-fold. First, by taking regional initiatives such as the Moscow format, it seeks to boost its regional standing and great power status recognition. As said earlier, though the US has been closely engaging Russia in talks about Afghanistan, Russia demands that regional consultations on Afghanistan should take place also at Russia's initiative. Second, by undermining the Afghan government, Russia expresses its dissatisfaction with the leadership in Kabul, with which Russia's relationship has been steadily deteriorating over the last years. Russia has been continuously working with non-state actors, including the Taliban in Afghanistan and regional countries such as Iran, to assert itself as the other significant player in Afghanistan. While it has opposed the Taliban's idea of Islamic Emirate, Russia's support to the current government leadership in Afghanistan has diminished. After yet another problematic presidential elections in Afghanistan in 2019, Russia and some other countries like Iran refrained from endorsing Ashraf Ghani's government until a political agreement was reached with Ghani's electoral rival Dr Abdullah Abdullah who

had declared a parallel government in Kabul. In a recent interview with Sputnik Afghanistan, Russian Special Envoy Zamir Kabulov expressed support for an interim government in Afghanistan as the only pathway to a political settlement with the Taliban.[4] Earlier the Taliban delegation visiting Moscow demanded President Ashraf Ghani's resignation as a step towards a peaceful settlement.[5]

Russia's rather complicated relationship with the Afghan government reflects an emerging problem concerning regional consensus on peace in Afghanistan, which concerns the role and position of the Afghan government in regional diplomacy. Support to the current government leadership has been decreasing as regional countries have been expanding contacts with the Taliban, often at the expense of the state in Afghanistan. Except for India, all other major players have active contacts with the Taliban, which has resulted in the group's greater recognition and political legitimacy. Iran and Turkmenistan are two other countries besides Russia that have recently hosted Taliban delegations for regional consultations. The Afghan government's efforts for building regional consensus on the central role of the Afghan government in the peace process and the preservation of the principle of state-to-state relationship *vis-a-vis* Afghanistan have repeatedly failed. Political divisions, the ruling elites' corruption and their social disconnect with the population, and bad leadership has made the current government in Afghanistan increasingly unpopular with the Afghans, making it difficult for countries of the region and beyond to extend unconditional support to the government in Kabul.

The absence of an effective and inclusive regional diplomacy and consensus on Afghanistan has produced strategic uncertainty in the region, leading to a situation of self-help and hedging behaviour among regional countries. This is destructive for the prospect of peace in Afghanistan and the regional stability in general as it enhances competitive behaviour among countries with strategic interests in Afghanistan. This is not an ideal scenario, and it must change for peace in Afghanistan to get any real chance. The security outcome of regional mingling with the Taliban at the expense of the state in Afghanistan could prove disastrous and likely to further push Afghanistan down on the path towards state collapse and eventually civil war as political recognition injects further resolve in the Taliban to continue fighting and avoid a negotiated settlement.

The Taliban does not want a negotiated settlement because the group's ultimate goal is to topple the government in Kabul so that it can declare victory in Jihad against the US and the US-backed Afghan government. This has been the group's principle narrative of mobilisation and central to its legitimacy. But the region cannot afford to allow that to

happen both because a Taliban victory will most likely end in a new civil war, regional instability and chaos, and further inspiration and revitalisation of the global Jihad agenda. The region has no safer choice but to engage in constructive regional diplomacy for peace in Afghanistan and stability in the region.

CRAFTING A REGIONAL DIPLOMACY FOR PEACE

The current efforts for regional peace diplomacy, including the US's great power approach, has been largely unsuccessful and unsustainable. The US's approach has excluded important players such as India and Iran while failing to foster sustained regional engagement with others. Peace in Afghanistan is impossible without a concerted and sustained effort to bring key regional players together to discuss and shape a regional approach that fosters cooperation and helps common understanding around principal issues concerning peace in Afghanistan and the region. Without that, violence in Afghanistan will likely perpetuate, leading to state collapse, civil war and further regional instability - risks highlighted by the Afghanistan Study Group.

As difficult as it may be, regional consensus on peace in Afghanistan is achievable with resolve and a renewed commitment to peace among key regional actors and the US, and through crafting regional diplomacy that is inclusive and effective. The following policy recommendations could help shape such regional diplomacy for peace in Afghanistan:

- To prevent a state collapse in Kabul which will further complicate the regional dynamics, the US and NATO must extend its military engagement in Afghanistan and avoid withdrawing its forces to maintain leverage on the Taliban until a political settlement. The latter must be followed by a successful transition to a civil government in Kabul that is acceptable to Afghans and the international community. The Taliban will not agree to any such extension, but cultivating regional support for the idea provides an important political opportunity to force the Taliban into accepting a political settlement. A complete military withdrawal from Afghanistan at any point before the establishment of a legitimate government in Kabul will risk state collapse and descending to civil war. To stay, however, the US needs to reach an understanding with Russia, China and Iran on the scope of its military presence until it can exit Afghanistan in an orderly and responsible manner.

- To reach the above objective, the US and NATO military presence in Afghanistan must be accompanied by intensified regional engagement with countries of the region. The US's great power diplomacy has not worked well. For inclusive and successful regional diplomacy, the US needs to accommodate Russia, India and Iran, which is not possible at the US's initiative alone. For better results, more inclusive regional avenues such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) or the Heart of Asia-Istanbul process must be explored to shape an effective state-to-state regional diplomacy and garner broader regional consensus on key political issues concerning the Afghan peace process.
- Another possible format that could be of help is 6+1, an informal regional consultation forum initiated by Russia and Afghanistan back in 2012, which included China, Pakistan, India, Iran and the US besides Afghanistan and Russia. This format is smaller than the SCO and Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process and thus more favourable to regional powers. At the same time, it is inclusive enough to involve all major players in the region. The format can be amended to include the EU, whose political and economic support is critical to post-peace Afghanistan. Regional engagement within such diplomatic forums should follow concrete steps towards putting maximum political pressure on the Taliban to agree to a political settlement with Kabul on the one hand and forming an agreement on a set of key principles among countries of the region regarding the future of Afghanistan, including regional cooperation on counter-terrorism and the role of the US post-peace settlement, on the other. The latter is one of the key sources of concerns in Russia and Iran in particular.
- And finally, as deep as mistrust in the current government leadership in Afghanistan is in some countries in the region, a path to peace and stability in Afghanistan is unavailable outside legitimate state-to-state engagement. Any regional diplomacy that undermines the formal state in Afghanistan is going to destabilise the environment further. The regional countries, therefore, must avoid strategic posturing *vis-a-vis* the Afghan peace process at the expense of the state, Afghans' lives and regional stability. However, for a regional consensus on the central role of the state in regional diplomacy to emerge, it is essential to bring some fundamental reforms in governance in Kabul to make it more inclusive, participatory, corruption-free and accountable to its citizens in order to enhance its public support and national and international consensus on it.

REFERENCES

[1] See 'Afghanistan Study Group Final Report: A pathway for Peace in Afghanistan'. *USIP* (February 2021). Available at <<https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/02/afghanistan-study-group-final-report-pathway-peace-afghanistan>>

[2] See Interview with Russian Special Envoy for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov, *Sputniknews* (16 February 2021). Available at <<https://af.sputniknews.com/opinion/202102166423616>>

[3] See Russia's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's remarks at https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2764002>

[4] Interview with Zamir Kabulov, *Sputniknews*, (16 February 2021).

[5] See report by Ayaz Gul 'Taliban Calls on Biden Administration to Honor Trump Afghan Commitments', *VOANews*, (29 January 2021) available at <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/taliban-calls-biden-administration-honor-trump-afghan-commitments>

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