Understanding Taliban and the Peace Process

Dr. Smita Tiwari *

Introduction

Peace in Afghanistan has remained elusive for decades. For one reason or another, the country has, since long, been a centre of power struggle between the erstwhile two superpowers followed by a civil war. Later on, it emerged as a battlefield for ‘war on terror’ and rise in insurgency. Attempts to bring peace to the war-torn country have been proved delusive. After the withdrawal of ISAF, Afghanistan is witnessing the resurgence of Taliban as a major security challenge to the Government of Afghanistan. At the end of 2015, it was being expected that the sudden revelation of Taliban’s reclusive leader Mullah Omar’s death would weaken the Taliban and subsequently it would disintegrate. However, contrary to that belief, Taliban has strengthened despite being divided into two factions. The more powerful faction led by Mullah Mohammad Akhtar Mansoor, who succeeded Mullah Omar, has been successful in carrying out fierce attacks in Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan.
At present, the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) seems incapable to tackle alone the challenges posed by Taliban. In July 2015, diplomatic efforts were made to engage them in the peace process; however, it was derailed due to the revelation of Mullah Omar’s death. The current initiative to engage Taliban by Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) is in the process and, so far, though the Taliban has rejected the offer to participate in the current peace negotiations, it is yet to be seen in what direction the peace process would proceed. The present paper attempts to analyse the resurgence of Taliban as a ‘threat’ and the peace initiatives by the Government of Afghanistan and the international community to engage Taliban.

**Is Taliban Gaining Strength?**

When the Taliban was toppled down in 2001 as a result of ‘war on terror’ in Afghanistan, a massive reorganisation took place within Taliban and by 2004, it launched a full scale insurgency in Afghanistan. It emerged as ‘neo-Taliban’ signalling important discontinuity with the ‘old Taliban’ of 1994-2001. The transformation was both tactical as well as strategic. Efforts were made to re-brand themselves as a broad based independence movement rather than being a group of religious fundamentalists obsessed with personal morality. Several prohibitions, which symbolised the austerity of Taliban rule during the 1990s, were eased. The ‘neo-Taliban’, which grew in strength in late 2006-2007, became tolerant on a number of issues, such as – watching television and cinema, photography, relaxing social norms of growing beard for men, allowing female education, their attitude on narcotics, etc. They also softened their position towards Shias. These relaxations were made for wider acceptability of Taliban in the Afghan society, which had eroded due to the implementation of harsh religious rules.

Also, the Taliban has grown up purely as an Afghan movement. In 2008, in an interview, the official spokesman of the Afghan Taliban, Zabiullah Mujahid stated that “the Mujahideen of Islamic Emirate are based in Afghanistan, the leadership is in Afghanistan, and our activities are inside Afghanistan.” The Afghan Taliban distanced itself from both Al Qaeda and the Pakistan Taliban’s global terror campaign. The Afghan Taliban has refined itself to become more suitable in the local context in Afghanistan. Further, the Taliban sees itself as a government in exile. For long, its leadership has been demanding complete withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan and the establishment of an Islamic government in the country. To make this happen, it is necessary for an insurgent group to delegitimize the government. Therefore, Taliban’s strategy at the local level has been to subvert, weaken and drive out institutions of state
governance, isolate the Afghan security forces, and build parallel institutions with which to increase its influence across Afghanistan’s periphery.\textsuperscript{10} There are a number of areas where the Taliban has made progress in expanding governance in the countryside. During initial phase of the movement’s reorganisation in 2002, Mullah Omar re-established contacts with commanders and recruited fighters from widespread areas in Afghanistan. Subsequently, the current insurgency includes a diverse set of actors: local groups, political parties, jihadi groups of 1980s and 1990s and different tribal components; all of them have united to oppose the post-Taliban order.\textsuperscript{11}

The rise in Taliban’s activity since 2015 is noteworthy. On 1\textsuperscript{st} January 2015, NATO-led coalition forces transferred power to the Afghan National Defense and Security Force\textsuperscript{12} (ANDSF). The number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, which peaked at about 100,000 in June 2011, stands at about 9,800, of which most are assigned to the 13,000-person NATO-led “Resolute Support Mission” to train, assist, and advise (TAA) and the ANDSF.\textsuperscript{13} The political transformation in the country and the withdrawal of ISAF from Afghanistan provided Taliban the opportunity as well as motivation not only to escalate attacks, but also to challenge the ANDSF. The 2015 fighting season between Afghan security forces and Taliban turned out to be one of the bloodiest on record since 2001.\textsuperscript{14} Security situation has been deteriorating throughout the country. Besides carrying out suicide attacks on various important locations, Taliban has focused on controlling territories which are far from its traditional stronghold. It staged numerous attacks on police checkpoints and military installations in Kabul and also in provinces located north and south of Kabul. The attack on Afghan parliament in June 2015 and capturing Kunduz in September 2015, though briefly, have been a significant success for Taliban, post-NATO withdrawal. Taliban has also strengthened its position in eastern provinces of Afghanistan, such as Ghazni, Paktika, Khost, Nangarhar, etc.\textsuperscript{15} They have reportedly consolidated safe-havens in provinces immediately close to Kabul as Wardak, Kapisa and Logar.\textsuperscript{16} With a significant presence in roughly 30 percent of districts across the nation, according to Western and Afghan officials, cited in Sudarsan Raghavan (2015), the Taliban now holds more territory than in any year since 2001.\textsuperscript{17}

Taliban has been adopting various strategies to showcase its strength. One of the important strategies to demonstrate increasing Taliban activities across Afghanistan is civilian casualties. According to the Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2015, the number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan recorded the highest in 2015.\textsuperscript{18} The Report points out
that the anti-Government elements continue to cause the most harm – 62 per cent of all civilian casualties – despite a 10 per cent reduction from 2014 in the total civilian casualties resulting from their attacks.\textsuperscript{19} The figure below shows the increasing trends of civilian deaths and injuries during 2009 to 2015.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Civilian deaths and injuries}
\textit{January to December 2009 - 2015}
\end{center}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{civilian_deaths_injuries_graph.png}
\caption{Source: afghannews.com.af\textsuperscript{20}}
\end{figure}

These trends pose a serious challenge for ANDSF post-ISAF withdrawal. The ANDSF provided relative security and stability during presidential election in 2014; therefore, it was assumed that they are capable of dealing with the myriad challenges posed by insurgents and would be able to contribute in reconstruction works in Afghanistan. The U.S. Defense Department concluded in its October 2014 report that the Afghan security forces were on track to assume full responsibility for security in 2015 and had made “significant strides” towards achieving operational autonomy.\textsuperscript{21} The ANDSF are better trained and equipped and possess impressive materiel capabilities, including howitzers, Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, and cargo aircraft, which the insurgents lack.\textsuperscript{22} The current authorized strength of ANDSF is 352,000 personnel.\textsuperscript{23} The size of the forces is tabulated below:
Current Authorized Strength of ANDSF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl No.</th>
<th>Afghan Forces</th>
<th>Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Afghan National Army (ANA)</td>
<td>195,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Afghan National Police (ANP)</td>
<td>157,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Afghan Local police (ALP)</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ANDSF will, however, require more coalition assistance to close key capability gaps in aviation, intelligence, special operations to conduct tasks, such as planning, programming, budgeting, and human resource management. Also, the mixed records of ANDSF performance during 2014-2015 Taliban offensives indicate the remaining limitation in ANDSF capabilities. For example, about 7,000 members of ANDSF had been killed in the year 2015 (till November) and 12,000 injured, which is 26 percent increase over total number of dead and wounded in all of 2014.

Taliban: Organisational Structure and Intrinsic Frictions

The neo-Taliban is anything but a monolithic and united movement. The Taliban organization is a network of franchises, an arrangement that fits well with tribal traditions. Thomas Rutting has aptly described that “organisationally, the Taleban is network of networks.” It is an umbrella term which includes various local, national and trans-national groups. Its former leader Mullah Mohammed Omar was from Hotaki clan of Ghilzai supertribe, the largest Pashtun confederation. When he re-grouped the Taliban in 2002 onwards, it comprised of new groups with new agendas. In neo-Taliban, three main insurgent groups can be identified: the Quetta Shura, the Haqqani Network, and Hizb-e-Islami Gulbuddin, besides other small, local autonomous groups. The Quetta Shura is the most influential group, which was headed by Mullah Omar and directions were given by group’s operational commander Abdul Ghani Baradar. The Quetta Shura provides direction to four regional military shuras: Quetta, Peshawar, Miramshah and Gerdi Jangal, and 10 committees: military, finance, political affairs, culture and information, interior affairs, prisoners and refugees, education, recruitment, repatriation committee and the Ulema council. The table below shows the three main groups and their areas of influence.
Neo-Taliban Insurgent Groups (when Mullah Omar was alive)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Current Location</th>
<th>Areas of Operation (provinces)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Quetta Shura (QS)</td>
<td>Mullah Mohammed Omar</td>
<td>Quetta Pakistan</td>
<td>Uruzgan, Zabul, Kandhar and Helmand Provinces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Haqqani Network (HN)</td>
<td>Jalaudin Haqqani and Sirajuddin Haqqani</td>
<td>Miramshah in north Waziristan, Pakistan</td>
<td>Khost, Logar, Wardak, Paktia, Paktika</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bill Roggio (2010) and Shehzad H. Qazi (2011)

After the revelation of death of Mullah Omar in July 2015, Taliban was led by Mullah Akhtar Mansour, who was the first Deputy and a close aide of Mullah Omar. However, his succession was disputed and challenged within Taliban. Those who support Mansour include Noorudin Turabi, logistics expert, and head of the Taliban's senior shura council, Shahabuddin Delawar. Many who were opposing the succession of Mullah Mansour, including Mullah Omar’s son Mullah Yaqub, who asserted that Pakistan had engineered the “succession”, gradually accepted him as his leader. An influential Taliban figure, who was heading the Taliban office in Doha, Qatar, Tayeb Agha, resigned on the grounds that the succession should have been determined in Afghanistan itself, not by figures in exile in Pakistan. However, Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri declared his support for Mansour on August 13, 2015, helping rally the dissidents to acquiesce in Mansour’s accession. The September 2015 capture of Kunduz further strengthened the position of Taliban. Nonetheless, a splinter group was formed in November 2015 under Mullah Mohammed Rassul named ‘High Council of Afghanistan Islamic Emirate’. The diagram below (based on readings on Taliban leadership) shows the divided leadership in Taliban.
Both the factions have been reportedly fighting each other to claim authentic representation of Taliban. However, Taliban under Mullah Mansour is more powerful because he has the backing of Quetta Shura and has wider support of other militant groups. Also Mullah Mansour faction is financially and militarily far superior to the other group, led by Mullah Rasoul. Appointing two influential deputies: Sikh Haibatullah Akhundzada and The Haqqani Network’s head Sirajuddin Haqqani has further boosted Mullah Mansour’s claim. The new leader appears determined to prove his mettle and strengthen the Taliban’s bargaining position by escalating attacks. However, Hizb-e-Islami’s Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who supported Taliban in its reformation years, has been showing interest in peace talks initiated by the Government of
Afghanistan for the last couple of years. Whereas the faction group under Mullah Rassul is centred in Afghanistan and has relatively limited influence. Further, there are other influential local tribal warlords, who support or resist Taliban in their sphere of influence.

**Taliban: Cadre, Finance and Strategy**

**Cadre**

The Taliban has been able to access full range of resources which primarily include human and financial resources. Human resource is crucial for the success or failure of any insurgency. However, one of the concerns, in the context of Taliban has been - what is the strength of Taliban? How many cadres are there in numbers? And how united or disunited is the Taliban? The difficulty of distinguishing between full time fighters, part-timers, political cadres and facilitators of various kinds complicates the task of estimating the number of Taliban insurgents. Based on their areas of operation and their modus operandi, it is understood that Taliban must have a force of full time fighters of at least 15,000. A few thousand operate across the border in Pakistan; a few thousand are “honorary Taliban”, usually local strongmen, who operate in conjunction with the movement, and around tens of thousands are part-time fighters, mostly organised in local militias. Taliban also has some political cadres who carry their messages to the remote areas and facilitators, such as spies, informers, providers of food, supplies and accommodation. In 2014, the core Taliban force was estimated at over 60,000, according to Matt Waldman, a Fellow at Harvard’s Kennedy School and an Associate Fellow at Chatham House. With such a huge number, the Taliban remains the most vigorous insurgent group in Afghanistan.

Though the Taliban doesn’t have a formal recruitment process, with more than two generations of war-hardened inhabitants to draw from, the Taliban recruits experienced fighters who know the terrain and can survive in the harsh environment. In the areas of limited influence, they rely on the local leaders. On the other hand, the local Pashtuns, rendered vulnerable by what they perceive to be a lack of influence in the Kabul government, have been more amenable to the Taliban lately. Moreover, “Pashtun suspicions and mistrust of the government were further heightened by the Afghan Transitional Authority’s inability to protect Pashtuns from the wave of human rights abuses perpetrated by insurgents and warlords since the fall of the Taliban.”

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Finance

It is equally difficult to map the financial resources of Taliban. However, it is clear that the Taliban generates revenue from both external and internal sources. They raise majority of their external revenue through donations from sympathisers and supporters among Muslim community worldwide as Taliban has made itself a popular brand. Most of the donations are provided under the official title of Zakat as they have virtually no direct involvement with traditional banking system.\(^43\) Broad estimates of external revenue hover around $100 million per year, while if included with the internal revenue, the total amount goes up to $250 million per year.\(^44\) For internal revenue generation, Taliban relies on taxation, kidnappings, drug trafficking, donations from local population, etc. in their areas of influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Larger companies in Afghanistan have started paying heavy taxes to Taliban in order to be allowed to operate without threat.\(^45\) The protection money is used to purchase motorcycle fuel, phone cards, ammunition or other items used to maintain Taliban operation in the area.

The narcotics trade is also a source of revenue to the Taliban. Though Taliban itself has not indulged in the production or distribution, however, it collects taxes from any individual involved in this activity.\(^46\) In May 2015, the UN Office of Drug and Crime published its World Drug Report, highlighting Afghanistan as the world’s largest producer of opium in 2014.\(^47\) Afghanistan accounted for 85 percent of global production of drugs with an estimate of 6,400 tons.\(^48\) Helmand province is the source of much of country’s opium, providing lucrative funding for the insurgents. In the Afghan National Security Council meeting, Rahmatullah Nebil, the nation’s former intelligence chief described the province as “the biggest recruiting tool for Taliban” and its “primary source of revenue”.\(^49\) Thus, it is not surprising that influence over Afghanistan narcotics economy is a major source of income for Taliban. According to John Sopko, the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), “It is widely thought that every drug organisation supports or works with insurgents in Afghanistan,” even if they do not participate directly in production activities.\(^50\)

Based on the detainee’s estimates, as mentioned in the Special Report on Detainee Perspectives,\(^51\) the Taliban appears to require between $100 million to $ 150 million per year to operate. However, without exception, Taliban members do not receive salaries or other financial incentives for their work.\(^52\)
Strategy

Since 2010, Taliban’s strategy has focused increasingly on redefining the Taliban ‘Emirate’ as a legitimate government. They have widened their popular support within Afghanistan. The Taliban’s La’iha or code of conduct is designed specifically to maintain control of Taliban ranks and limit the possibility of rogue elements. The La’iha serves as a guide for promoting close relationships between Taliban commanders and local civilian leaders. Thus, Taliban leaders often work closely with local leaders in order to minimise the appearance of outside intrusion. The Taliban follows two main goals: first, co-opt or sideline their rivals by promoting defections within their ranks, and second, to establish strongholds from which they could pursue their military and political activities and their expansion. The neo-Taliban’s military strategy is known as “fourth generation warfare”, which uses all available networks – political, economic, social and military – to confront the enemy. The neo-Taliban has adopted Mao’s guerrilla warfare and his “strategic defensive” and “strategic stalemate” techniques. The purpose of these techniques is to weaken the government, kill government and opposition leaders, and to intimidate police and military officials. Their goal is to put immense pressure on Afghanistan’s decision makers, causing them to eventually capitulate, regardless of success or failure on the battlefield. The picture (below) shows the Taliban threat in Afghanistan.

As a composite movement, the Taliban’s interests vary. However, most Talibs share interests, such as the withdrawal of foreign troops, the establishment of strict ‘Islamic System’ and action against corruption.

Taliban and Daesh: Will there be a Struggle for Afghanistan?

Taliban is not the only security threat in Afghanistan. The presence of Daesh or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) – Khorasan Province (IS-KP) primarily in the eastern province of Nangarhar remains a concern for the Taliban, the Afghan government, and the international community. The influence of Islamic State is growing as it recruits more extremists Taliban members and bring fighter from non-Pashtun communities as Uzbeks and Pakistanis. Through attacks against a United Nations (UN) vehicle and the ANDSF in September 2015, IS-KP has demonstrated that it is operationally emerging. The picture below shows the Taliban control and influence as well as Daesh/ ISIS presence in Afghanistan.
As the picture above projects, Taliban commands control/influence in a wider area of Afghanistan and has larger sympathisers, whereas Daesh is centred in and around Nangarhar Province. However, if remained unchecked, Daesh can expand its area of control/influence considerably. Daesh has already announced the creation of Khorasan shura as it requires its presence in the region in order to actualize its literal interpretation of apocalyptic scripture. Islamic religious texts state that the army of true believers will gather in the Khorasan before the apocalypse. Several former senior members of Tahreek-e-Taliban (TTP) have joined Daesh in Khorasan shura. In April 2015, Daesh claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in Jalalabad that killed 35 people – its first serious attacks against civilians in Afghanistan.

The presence of Daesh in Afghanistan – however minimal or imagined – complicates the
and peace process in Afghanistan. The Taliban might find negotiations costly with respect to maintaining unity among rank and file members of Taliban (as the dominant view in Taliban is against peace talks) and also Taliban might feel compelled to competing Daesh on the battlefield. At least, internationally, Daesh is already cutting the funding pool of Taliban. Thus, though Daesh has limited presence/ influence in the region at present, it has the potential to grow large, if Taliban weakens due to its internal frictions.

**Peace Process: Interplay of International Actors**

**The U.S.**

December 2015 marks nearly one year into United States Forces – Afghanistan (USFOR-A) Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led Resolute Support (RS) mission focused on developing Afghan institutional capacity to enhance security and stability across Afghanistan. The U.S. strategy in Afghanistan remains centred on working with NATO partners and the international community to provide financial and advisory support to the Afghan government to enable a well-trained, equipped, and sustainable ANDSF to provide security in Afghanistan. The U.S. and Afghan governments agree that the best way to ensure lasting peace and security in Afghanistan is reconciliation and a political settlement with the Taliban. In November 2015, the Pentagon announced that the United States now consider the Afghan Taliban an important partner in the Afghan-led reconciliation process, and as a confidence building measure, the U.S. military would no longer conduct counter-terrorism actions against Taliban militants. Considering Taliban as an integral part of Afghan reconciliation is one of the significant U.S. policy shift in Afghanistan. However, this potential amnesty and invitation to participate in the peace talks has not been extended to the Haqqani Network, a consequential stakeholder in and component of the Afghan insurgency. This approach of United States is seemingly understood as a hindering factor in the peace process as Haqqani Network has considerable influence on Taliban.

**Russia**

Russia’s troubled past in Afghanistan as well as a long history of economic and security dominance in the neighbouring region of Central Asia, both define and constrain Russia’s interests and policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Currently, Russia’s primary role in Afghanistan is to provide reconstruction and economic cooperation. However, it provides limited security assistance to the Afghan government and has a genuine interest in the improved security and
functionality of the state in Afghanistan, especially in view of its genuine security and counter-narcotics concerns.\textsuperscript{72} Deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and advent of Taliban may lead to spread of Islamic fundamentalism to Central Asia and beyond posing serious security threat. Though any direct Russian military involvement or security operations in Afghanistan are ruled out,\textsuperscript{73} however, Russia is considering reintroducing a Russian military presence along the Tajik-Afghan border.\textsuperscript{74} The decision to permit the transit of NATO military aid to Afghanistan via Russia is an indication of Moscow’s apprehension about a Taliban victory.\textsuperscript{75} Moscow recently provided a package of 10,000 automatic rifles to Afghanistan to help the country’s security forces fight the insurgent groups.\textsuperscript{76} Another major Russian concern is the drug war that its politicians say is being waged upon it from Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{77}

Though Russia is upset because of being sidelined in current Afghanistan peace process, however, it has supported the initiative by QCG and urged Taliban to join the talks and insisted that the only option for the militants was to come to table of negotiations with the government of Afghanistan.

\textbf{China}

As Afghanistan look towards China for a major role both in its economic development as well as in the security stabilization, similarly, China, too, seems to be forthcoming for playing a positive role in the contemporary Afghanistan. China’s interests in Afghanistan are mainly two-fold: first, to extend its economic, security and political footprints in the region; second, to prevent the spread of militant Islam into its restive Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region.\textsuperscript{78} For China, there are huge economic incentives for engaging in Afghanistan, especially critical copper and mineral deposits. China has agreed to build a 1500 megawatt dam on the Kunar River, one of the violent place in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{79} China will also facilitate the construction of road and rail links around the region.\textsuperscript{80} China viewed the U.S.-NATO military presence and assistance to Afghanistan as supporting its interests.

After the withdrawal of NATO forces China has started to seriously move to fill the vacuum and develop its bilateral relationship with Afghanistan. It is not only signing partnership agreement with the government in Afghanistan but also simultaneously upgrading its skill to engage with Taliban. President Ghani made significant efforts to favour China’s involvement in the Pakistan-led peace process. Ghani’s first foreign visit after assuming office was to China, in
October 2014, during which 15 Uyghur militants from Afghan territory were extradited to please Beijing. Chinese leadership appointed Sun Yuxi, a senior diplomat familiar with the country, as a Special Envoy to Afghanistan. China organised unofficial peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government representatives in May 2015, which took place in Urumqi. China is also playing an active role as a member of QCG to facilitate peace talks between Government of Afghanistan and Taliban. Recently, China has offered to expand its military aid in Afghanistan, with a total value of $73 million.

In Afghanistan, China’s interests converge more with India, however, it relies on Pakistan for its strategy and approach.

Pakistan
Though Pakistan’s role in peace-talks invites scepticism, since Ashraf Ghani has come to power in August 2014, Afghanistan’s relations with Pakistan saw an unprecedented improvement. Kabul relied on Pakistan for the successful conclusion of peace-talks as Ghani believed that Pakistan has an inevitable role in bringing Taliban to the negotiating table. However, Pakistan sees an interest in maintaining influence in Afghanistan and preventing the emergence of India-aligned government in Kabul. Therefore, Pakistan’s approach in Afghanistan has been, primarily, maintaining a ‘strategic depth’ to counter India’s engagement in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has been under pressure to clamp down on militant activities on its western frontiers. It has to show its commitment by facilitating the peace talks by bringing Taliban to the negotiating table. However, how much influence Pakistan can or wishes to exert on Taliban, remains to be seen in future. So far, Pakistan has been maintaining that it can only convince Taliban and cannot pressurise them. In June 2013, Taliban opened its first overseas office in Qatar, which clearly shows that Taliban wants to operate independently, and not via Pakistan. Also, Pakistan intentions need to be questioned given the fact that terrorist activities have been increased since the government of Afghanistan has initiated peace process last year.

Iran
Iran has a strong interest in having a friendly and stable government in Kabul. Tehran promotes its interests in Afghanistan primarily through the use of ‘soft power’, especially in its areas of traditional influence and cultural/language/religious proximity, and is concerned about any
‘disproportionate’ rise of the Taliban.\textsuperscript{86} Iran has cultivated allies in Kabul through maintaining good relations with northern alliance.\textsuperscript{87} Since then, the country has established considerable political and economic presence in its eastern neighbour—both overt and covert—through generous cash payments to the Afghan government and essential development aid delivered through religious and charitable organizations.\textsuperscript{88} Iran’s national interest can be seen as both exporting its political ideology – government by clerics – into Afghanistan and containing Salafism and Sunni extremism within their own territories through religious conflicts and the use of Shiite communities as proxies.\textsuperscript{89} Iran’s sponsorship of religious madrasas and clerics in Afghanistan, however, has not been ignored by its regional rival, Saudi Arabia and the Iran-Saudi symbol rivalry – an extension of the Shia-Sunni divide – is intensifying the radicalization of religious communities in Afghanistan.

Iran has good reasons for wanting to see a more stable Afghanistan, both to tackle the problem of refugees—Iran is host to approximately 2 million registered and unregistered refugees—and to block the flow of Afghan drugs.\textsuperscript{90} But often Iran’s efforts for reconstruction of Afghanistan, expanding its trade links, fighting against illegal drugs etc, has been systematically hindered or impeded by US policy aimed at confronting Iran’s growing stature in the region.\textsuperscript{91} However, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif was instrumental in facilitating the 2001 Bonn agreement that gave birth to the current political order in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{92} Further, Tehran also quietly helped US Secretary of State John Kerry’s other diplomatic achievement - the formation of the Afghan National Unity government in 2014. With the recent U.S.-Iran nuclear rapprochement, Tehran and Washington should be able to cooperating each other on the stabilisation and development of Afghanistan and may pave the way for Iran to play a constructive role in Afghanistan.

India

India wants to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for anti-Indian militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Haqqani Network. India views Afghan Taliban as a geopolitical instrument of Pakistan, and considering Taliban’s resurgence in Afghanistan as a security threat, India’s concerns seems genuine. Therefore, Indian interests lie in a strong friendly government in Kabul, which is capable of containing anti-India activities on its soil. Security and stability in Afghanistan is crucial for India, as the instability would benefit the militant groups. India’s interest also lies in connecting Central Asia through Afghanistan. Therefore, India is playing a
proactive role in Afghanistan with large aid packages, infrastructural and capacity building programmes. Whereas most of these programmes are geared towards development processes in Afghanistan, Pakistan fears the involvement of India as potential problem for the strategic depth that Pakistan has so far maintained in Afghanistan. Further, because of the Pakistani influence over the Taliban, Afghanistan and the international community (the US and China) may not consider India’s role as fruitful in the peace dialogue. However, the Chief Executive Officer of Afghanistan Abdullah Abdullah has said that India is “fully in the picture”, and is being kept abreast about every single development aimed at bringing stability in the region.93

Peace Process in Afghanistan: An Impending Reality

Peace negotiation in Afghanistan is a complex process and there are several actors and stakeholders involved in it or influencing it. Considering that Taliban poses a formidable challenge to the security of Afghanistan and acknowledging that peace can only be brought through negotiations and dialogue, the Government of Afghanistan initiated a peace process in 2015. However, the peace process failed in July 2015 due to the revelation of Mullah Omar’s death and subsequently calling off of the talks by Taliban. In December 2015, four member QCG was formed during 'Heart of Asia' meeting to revive and facilitate the peace talks. In 2016, Afghanistan initiated a peace talk, amid growing Taliban attacks, with the help of QCG, and urged the insurgent group to join the negotiating table. With the completion of QCG’s four ‘preparatory meetings’ on January 11, 18 and February 06 and 23, the Group had been able to chalk out a roadmap, stipulating the stages and steps of the peace process for direct peace talks between the representatives of the Government of Afghanistan and Taliban groups. Also the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) was revamped so that it could support the envisaged process more effectively.

The Joint Press Release following the fourth QCG meeting states “The QCG member states invite all Taliban and other groups to participate through their authorized representatives in the first round of direct peace talks with the Afghan government expected to take place by the first week of March 2016. Pakistan has graciously offered to host this round of talks in Islamabad."94 However, in his remarks at fourth QCG meeting, the minister of Foreign Affairs, Salahuddin Rabbani maintained that though his government would welcome any group joining the peace process, but “those elements of the armed groups who continue to refuse to join the peace talks, and continue the path of violence must realize that our message to them is clear: our brave
security forces will not hesitate in their resolve to fight them resolutely, wherever they are, to stop them from committing terror, violence and bloodshed.”

Taliban’s Response

The Taliban, in their first response to the QCG statement issued by the spokesman of their political office in Qatar said they were “unaware of plans for talks.” The Taliban spokesman, Muhammad Naim Wardak, added that they had not changed their position regarding the conditions under which they would be ready to join a peace process, as announced at the second Pugwash meeting in Doha on 23 January 2016. Taliban has some pre-conditions before they go to the negotiating Table, which include: excluding names of Taliban leaders from the UN blacklist; taking down awards set for arrest or killing of militants; releasing Taliban prisoners; establishment of official venue for the Islamic Emirate in Doha as the only authorised entity; withdrawal of foreign troops; implementation of Shariah law; and formation of interim government. Qutbuddin Hilal, adviser to President Ashraf Ghani on Peace Affairs, told that government of Afghanistan is willing to consider their demands except one i.e. installation of an interim government in Kabul.

Following the fourth QCG meeting and assertion by four countries’ representatives that Taliban would soon participate in the peace process, the Taliban has denied that it would be participating in any upcoming talks. “We reject any such rumours and unequivocally state that the leader of Islamic Emirate has not authorised anyone to participate in the meeting,” Taliban said in its official statement. Instead, Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour has recently asked Taliban fighters to prepare for a “decisive battle” in this summer offensive to take advantage of battlefield victories of last year. The refusal by Taliban to participate in the peace process is not surprising as the initiative by QCG has been unilateral. The framing of the agenda and setting up of the timelines was done unilaterally by QCG group and Taliban was not involved in the initial preparation. Further, Taliban has also accused the U.S. and Government of Afghanistan of hypocrisy, as on one hand, they are initiating peace process and asking Taliban to denounce terrorism, on the other hand, they are continuing with their drone attacks and counter insurgency programme. Mullah Muhammad Rassul’s dissident Taliban faction has also rejected the peace talk’s offer and maintained that it would be ready to engage in peace talks only after the departure of all foreign troops.
The Taliban seems divided on whether they should openly engage in talks with Kabul government or wait for the time when the Afghan government collapse in the face of resistance. However, by rejecting the peace process, the Taliban is buying time for another violent offensive season, so that it can have an upper hand on the negotiating table. Since, a large number of NATO forces have withdrawn. Taliban would try to have its chance to establish Islamic Emirate. However, if Taliban agrees for the peace talks, in future, it will keep delaying the talks as it serves its interests both in peace politics and on the battle ground. However, all depends on the internal strength and coherence of Taliban to continue the insurgency.

**Afghanistan-Pakistan Differences**

Though Pakistan has seemingly shown its commitment regarding cooperation in peace talks several times, Afghanistan has not been very confident about the role of Pakistan. The relations between the two countries reached their lowest point when the news of Mullah Omar’s death was revealed after the Murree talks. Experts and officials of many countries debate whether Pakistan is committed to Afghan stability or to exerting control over Afghanistan through ties with the insurgent groups. DOD reports on Afghanistan’s stability have repeatedly identified Afghan militants’ safe haven in Pakistan as a threat to Afghan stability, and some recent DOD reports have stated that Pakistan uses proxy forces in Afghanistan to counter Indian influence there. After years of denying that it harbours insurgents, Pakistan admitted to maintaining contacts with the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network, and offered to act as a conduit between the Taliban and the United States and Afghanistan. However, since the Heart of Asia Conference, reportedly Washington and Beijing have been pushing Islamabad to cooperate with Afghanistan for brokering groundbreaking peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Though the four ‘preparatory meetings’ of the QCG were an attempt to mitigate the mistrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan, however, little progress seems to have been made on this front. The Afghanistan government believes that the onus lies with Pakistan for a successful peace negotiation with Taliban; however, Pakistan has maintained that it can only facilitate the peace talks. Further disagreement is that Afghanistan perceives Pakistan as having full control on Taliban and it can play a major role in the peace process, however, Pakistan says that it has only limited influence on Taliban. This is going to be a test of genuineness for Pakistan as it is believed that Pakistan has managed both – participating in a ‘war on terror’ and at the same time
facilitating Taliban to grow on its soil. Until now, Taliban has been seen as its strongest card in the regional power play, so what would motivate Pakistan, now, to act against Taliban?

However, Afghanistan’s anger is unlikely to change Pakistan’s Afghan policies since the country’s military and civil establishments still consider the Taliban as an important strategic asset and Pakistan security apparatus still believes that the Taliban could be used as a strategic tool to counter Indian presence in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, in an interview to Fars News Agency of Iran, former president Hamid Karzai has suggested that Russia, Iran and India should also be included in the ongoing international push to revive the stalled Afghan peace process.  

Challenges
There have been several gaps and challenges in the current peace initiative by QCG, which should be dealt carefully. The challenges are as follows:

i. Since Taliban is not a monolithic group, it has to be carefully charted out as to which group(s) the Afghan government is targeting to engage. The government should plan in advance what it would do if Taliban refuses to participate.

ii. In case the Taliban agrees to participate, what would be the agenda of talks? To what extent can the government develop a consensus with Taliban?

iii. Another important challenge for Afghanistan would be to convince Taliban to accept Afghan constitution, which seems a bit difficult as Taliban has always strived for Shariah based law in the country.

iv. The liberty and status of women and question of minorities also needs to be considered and safeguarded, since the Taliban holds extreme views on women and minorities.

v. To what extend the Government of Afghanistan can trust Pakistan and its role in the peace process? What role would China play to secure its national interests? Would it convince Pakistan to bring Taliban to the negotiating table or would it rely on Pakistan’s strategy?
vi. Reduction in violence across the country has been a pre-condition of the Government of Afghanistan. President Ghani’s first aim is to negotiate a ceasefire before Taliban’s spring offensive starts. However, would government go ahead with talks if Taliban does not denounce violence?

Recent Developments

While the peace talks between Afghan government and Taliban is in a stalemate, the Afghan government welcomed Gulbuddin Hekmatyar led HIG to enter the talks. The members of the militant group initially met Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) members on 17 March 2016. Though it is not being considered as a big achievement by the government, however, Afghan government hopes that this progress may motivate the Taliban to participate in the peace talks. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) said recently that the Government of Afghanistan would consult the U.S. and China on the peace process after Pakistan has failed to deliver on its promise to bring Taliban to the negotiating table. The much awaited peace process hit a deadlock since then and there seems no hope in near future for progress on this front.

On the other hand, Taliban has intensified its attacks making the success of the recent peace initiative doubtful. On 28 March 2016, Taliban sent a loud message by firing four rockets at the parliament’s new compound, signalling deterioration of security ahead of their spring offensive. The security of the country has become highly questionable when the government is falling short of providing sufficient security to the parliament, which had been attacked by the militants in the past as well. Afghanistan’s Security Chief, Massoud Andarabi, has directly blamed Pakistan’s ISI for being behind Taliban’s expanded insurgent activities.

More recently, on 19 April 2016, at least 68 people were killed and hundreds injured in a coordinated attack on the VIP protection unit in Kabul, killing mostly civilians, including children and women. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the assault that comes a week after the insurgent group announced the launch of its spring offensive. After this incident, President Ashraf Ghani has said that the Afghan government would respond ‘tit-for-tat’ to Taliban’s attacks and would show no mercy to them in future. He further said that the Afghan government ‘will never make peace with the regional and international terrorists.’ For now, the future of peace talks seems gloomy.
Conclusion

Taliban is a formidable challenge for Afghanistan and to handle it, Afghanistan would need a carefully deliberated strategy rather than just starting a peace process with so much of gaps and miscommunication. There is nothing new to offer from both sides. The point is that the two sides have extremely different goals for future of Afghanistan, and different views on various issues as women, minorities and education etc. and they have not been able to reconcile their respective positions. Further, Pakistan’s national interests are not congruent with Afghanistan’s national interests; therefore, Pakistan’s role in the peace process will be in doubt. Further, Mullah Mansour is seemingly not interested in peace process at this point of time. However, as of now, an important achievement for the Afghan government would be to make Taliban ready for the peace process and negotiate a cease-fire as spring and summer approach and there are possibilities of rise in insurgency by Taliban. No peace process can succeed unless the clashes stop and the parties in the war are ready to lay down their arms. In case the government fails to achieve ceasefire, it should strive for plan B – to weaken the insurgency in a meaningful way with the help of international community.

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The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

End Notes

1 The formal withdrawal of ISAF forces on 28 December 2014. However, limited number of troops stayed in Afghanistan to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, under Resolute Support Mission (RSM).

2 Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) was formed in December 2015 on the sidelines of 'Heart of Asia' meeting in Islamabad to strive to steer out Afghanistan from decades of violence and establish peace through peaceful means. Its members are: Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States.


5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.

8 Ibid., pp. 3-4.


10 Ibid., p. 11.


12 The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces is the official designation for the Afghan security forces used in the BSA and is the Afghan government’s preferred designation for the overall force.


16 Ibid.


19 Ibid.


23 Ibid, p. 34.

24 The strength of Afghan National Army includes 7,800 Afghan Air Force Personnel.

25 The Afghan Local police are not included in the overall ANDSF structure. They are additional personnel authorised by Minister of Interior (MoI).

26 Ibid.


32 Ibid.

33 See Kenneth Katzman, March 2016, p. 18.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.


39 Ibid.

40 Ibid, p. 5.


45 Ibid.


Ibid.


52 Ibid.
53 Ibid, p. 15.
54 Ibid, p.3.

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.


61 Khorasan refers to the historic region which comprises roughly eastern Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and the land west of Sindhu River in Pakistan.

63 Ibid.

65 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
69 Ibid.


71 Ibid.
73 Ibid, p. 6.


77 See Nasser Saghaﬁ-Ameri, June 2011, p. 12.


80 Ibid.


82 Sun Yuxi was former Ambassador in Afghanistan and India and worked as well with the Pakistani Embassy.


86 See Ekaterina Stepanova, June 2013.


88 Sumitha Narayanan Kutty, “Iran and Afghanistan” The Urgent Need for inclusive Regional Diplomacy”, Asia Policy, Number 17, January 2014, pp. 40-46.


90 See Nasser Saghaﬁ-Ameri, June 2011, p. 10.


97 Ibid.


97 Ibid.


111 See Ayaz Gul, March 2016.