

U.S. -Taliban Peace Deal: Challenges and Spoilers for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and United States

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Abstract

The U.S.-Taliban peace deal carries a lot of loopholes and vague dimensions that need to be addressed in the context of the key players on the regional chessboard, that is, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and China. This paper investigates post-deal challenges for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and provides an analysis of the roles of spoilers, including war-fed local insurgents, Indian interests, and the rest. The current political scenario of a nascent peace process is also critically analyzed along with the U.S. decision of the withdrawal of troops and the signing of the peace deal with the Taliban. The paper contemplates whether the peace process is a desperate move with grim consequences for Afghanistan or a comprehensive peace plan. Further, it highlights the need to develop a proper strategy to address the concerns of Afghan people and to address their interests while taking action against the insurgent groups. The paper concludes that peace negotiations that give due representation to the insurgent groups along with a comprehensive humanitarian plan will hopefully result in a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Peace deal, Taliban, U.S.

Introduction

There lies a wafer-thin hope of a break in the clouds hovering over Afghanistan for the last four decades; however, the idea of a stable Afghanistan has a long road ahead that is full of challenges. The evaluation of the true future course of the events is quite unpredictable and requires nonlinear political models for a scrupulous understanding of the swinging regional order. In this regard, the dawn of February 29, 2020, can be described as a momentous day as it concluded the longest war in the U.S. history and resulted in a deal between the U.S. and the Taliban. However, the situation continues to stay grim and carries a lot of risks and challenges for all the stakeholders, that is, Afghanistan, the U.S.,

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Pakistan, the Taliban, and the other regional players. The building of peace will not be a linear process in the light of continued differences between the parties to the conflict. The domestic situation of Afghanistan with two parallel governments makes execution of the deal really challenging. The conflict in Afghanistan is complex and multilayered; it varies from one part to another; and it includes multiple sub-conflicts and power-struggles (Waldman and Ruttig, 2011) pertaining to the indigenous players and the competing and conflicting interests of the regional states. All internal and external parties to the conflict are familiar with the ground realities of Afghanistan. Yet the self-interested power seekers and warring factions ignore the reality and pursue conflicting agendas as they continue to gain from the persisting conflict. Taking the high human and material cost of this longest war in the U.S. history into consideration, the expectation of a real victory for any side seems unlikely at the present (Rais, 2015).

This paper evaluates the post-deal challenges for Afghanistan alongside the role of spoilers with a special focus on India's role in Afghanistan. Then, the current peacemaking processes and negotiations are critically studied, and suggestions are made to comprehensively deal with the effects of war. Peace and stability will take a lot of time and require sufficient and uninterrupted aid by the international community that will contribute to the sustainable development of the country. The paper argues that to deal with Afghan quagmire effectively, a three-tier approach comprising an international dimension, regional cooperation, and national level measure is required.

II. The Nascent Peace Process: An Analysis

The Peace Talks between the Taliban and the U.S. government were held in Doha, Qatar, and Pakistan was invited as an observer in the Peace Process. On February 29, 2020, the U.S. envoy signed a peace deal with the Taliban in which for the first time the two parties made a mutual agreement to be followed by a comprehensive process of troops withdrawal and the restoration of peace. The Peace Deal consisted of four core agreements (State.gov, 2020):

1. The Afghan soil will not be used by any group or individual against the United States or its allies.
2. The U.S. guaranteed the mechanism and the timeline for a complete withdrawal of forces.
3. Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban), not recognized by the U.S., agreed to be a part of Intra-Afghan negotiations to lead Afghanistan towards peace.

4. Both parties will ensure a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire.

The agreement consisted of three parts in which the U.S. and the Taliban agreed to fulfill each other's demands. The U.S. agreed to release 5000 Taliban prisoners during the peace process while the Taliban promised not to use or let anyone else use the Afghan soil against the U.S. or its allies. The U.S. agreed to negotiate with the members of the United Nations Security Council to remove or review the sanctions imposed on the Taliban. The U.S. decided not to intervene in the domestic affairs of the post-settlement Afghan Islamic government.

The nature of the written agreement was friendly for the Taliban, and the U.S. agreed to the Taliban demands unilaterally without any negotiation with the Afghan Government. President Donald Trump described a brief phone call with the Taliban representative as a positive one, and reportedly acknowledged that Taliban were "tough people", therefore, prolonging war and violence was not in anyone's interest (Borger, 2020).

The agreement was to be followed by Intra-Afghan negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Besides, the agreement stated that the "Post-settlement Afghan Islamic Government" will not allow visas or passports to any anti-U.S. person or group, which implies that Taliban are supported even for office by the U.S. The first obstacle faced by the U.S. in the execution of this peace agreement was the denial on the part of Afghan Government, under President Ashraf Ghani, to release 5000 Taliban prisoners which the U.S. had already "guaranteed" in the Peace Deal. This indicates that the U.S. did not take the Afghan government into full confidence before signing the deal with the Taliban (Jakes, Faizi, and Rahim, 2020). Keeping this in mind, while India welcomed the U.S. intervention, it continued to show opposition to any peace process that gives the Taliban any representation.

The Peace Deal can be interpreted as a desperate mode of force withdrawal because Afghanistan had become a hole in the U.S. economy and was taking the biggest toll on U.S. integrity as a superpower. According to the Peace Deal, the U.S. aimed to completely withdraw all U.S. and allied troops in 9.5 months with a reduction of total troops to only 8600 in the first 135 days (Jakes, Faizi, and Rahim, 2020). As for diplomatic relations, the U.S. stated that it looked forward to positive relations with the Afghan government and agreed to engage in economic cooperation for reconstruction.

As far as the regional politics is concerned, the U.S. found its great ally in India; President Trump's visit to India and the U.S.-India economic and the defense deals speak volumes about their relationship (“Donald Trump in India: Key deals signed on defense but not on trade”, 2020). A warm welcome to President Trump by India and the U.S. government's ignorance towards the Delhi Massacre of Muslims during the very Presidential visit shows that the U.S. decided to support India unconditionally. As for brokering the Peace Deal between the Taliban and the U.S., Pakistan played an important role, and the U.S. acknowledged Pakistan's stance and efforts.

Many feared that the U.S. withdrawal would end in a Civil War in Afghanistan given the tensions between the Afghan Government and Taliban. Indeed, there was a high chance that the U.S. may not be able to execute the mechanisms of this peace process as perfectly as it had theoretically planned. For a long time after the agreement, the ceasefire was not executed properly, the Afghan government was not on the same page, and the Afghan people feared that they might be back in a Taliban Regime based on strict laws. Understandably, the Taliban whom even President Trump acknowledged as tough people were not likely to suddenly change their ways and become democratic.

Joe Biden Administration's Narrative on Peace Deal with the Taliban

A new administration assumed the U.S. office, and the White House's security adviser said that the U.S. administration will review the peace accord struck with the Afghan Taliban (“U.S. to review Afghan peace deal with Taliban,” 2021). He further said that the U.S. administration will review the agreement to see if the Taliban live up to their commitments to cut ties with the terrorist groups, to reduce terrorism, and to negotiate with the Afghan Government and other stakeholders. The security adviser further added: “We want to end this so-called forever war. We want to bring our forces home. We want to retain some capacity to deal with any resurgence of terrorism, which is what brought U.S. there in the first place.”(Bacevich, 2020).

As the new administration reviewed the peace accord, specific changes were expected. Biden administration emphasized regional stability and a “responsible” instead of a hasty withdrawal (Bacevich, 2020).

Some analysts in the U.S. security circles suggest that Biden might have continued an anti-terrorism approach in Afghanistan until the

administration reviewed the Afghan Taliban's peace accord. Biden administration could have changed some of the peace accord clauses to build pressure on the insurgents to show commitments to the Doha Agreement in order to reduce terrorism and violence. However, how the new administration would deal with the May 2021 deadline for troop withdrawal set in February 2020 Doha Accord was a challenge. Multiple deadlines of the agreement were missed; therefore, it was hard to imagine that the Biden administration would pull out all the U.S. forces from Afghanistan. Moreover, Afghan troops were not considered efficient enough to block the advancement of Taliban forces without U.S. forces' support (Doucet, 2020). Therefore, the administration could either continue the Afghan Taliban's political settlement or the counter-terrorism approach. However, it was not possible for President Biden to continue both.

III. Post-Peace Accords: Challenges for Afghanistan

Power Tussle in Afghanistan

The governing machinery of Afghanistan is fragile involving multiple actors each one of whom wants its share in power politics. There are different ethnicities such as Pashtuns, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, and each of these ethnic groups is striving and struggling for its share in power in Afghanistan. After the unfortunate incident of 9/11, the Northern Alliance was created in which Pashtuns were marginalized. The power tussle remained persistent and continued to threaten the establishment of peace in Afghanistan.

In September 2019, the presidential elections were conducted in Afghanistan and the results were declared on February 18, 2020 which announced the victory of President Ashraf Ghani over the former Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah. However, Abdullah and his supporters rejected the results and announced that they will establish a separate government. ("Abdullah Rejects Results, Announces Formation of Inclusive Govt", 2020). The tussle between the two again escalated the tensions among the political elite of Afghanistan and their supporters. It put on hold the start of intra-Afghan peace talks that would include the Taliban ("Pompeo makes urgent trip to try to mediate Afghan crisis; no word on if he pulled it off", 2020). The persistence of this tension could have led Afghanistan to a civil war because after the U.S. withdrawal from the country, a power vacuum was created, and each actor wanted to extract maximum benefit from it. After the peace deal, the Taliban also got a share in power, however, the situation was still unclear about what would be a political bargain that could satisfy

both Kabul and the Taliban because of which the Taliban would abandon armed struggle.

Intra-Afghan Peace Talks and Prisoner Exchange

Intra-Afghan Peace talks were the biggest challenge for all the stakeholders after the U.S.-Taliban Peace talks, and the prisoner exchange had already emerged as an obstacle in this regard. The Afghan government and the Taliban, two important actors in the Intra-Afghan peace talks and prisoner exchange, had different interpretations of the document that deals with the issue. According to some experts, the U.S.-Taliban agreement concurs that up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 Afghan forces held by the Taliban will be released by March 10, 2020 (Shalizi, 2020). The U.S.-Afghan joint declaration states that the Afghan government will participate in a dialogue with the Taliban on the number of prisoners that have to be released by both sides. President Ghani signed a document on March 11, 2020, which stated that the Afghan government would release 1,500 prisoners within 15 days after getting written assurance from them that they would remain out of the battlefield. The document further added that the Afghan government would release 500 prisoners every two weeks as the Taliban would assure them to decrease violence in the country. However, the Taliban spokesperson rejected these conditions and insisted on the immediate release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners before the intra-Afghan Peace talks (“Afghan government to free 1,500 prisoners; Taliban demands 5,000”, 2020). In a scenario when peace-talks have been signed between the U.S. and the Taliban, such tension on the issue of intra-Afghan peace talks and prisoner release were a great internal challenge not only for the Afghan government but also for the international community.

Resumption of Nation-Wide Violence

Another potential challenge for the Afghan government after the U.S.-Taliban peace talks was the resumption of nationwide violence. According to the official figures of the Afghan government, the Taliban carried out 76 attacks in 24 provinces of Afghanistan within the four days the U.S.-Taliban peace accord was signed (Rahim and Mashal, 2020). According to the U.S. military spokesperson, the Taliban carried out 43 attacks in Helmand province on March 3, 2020, and, in response, the U.S. carried out its first airstrike after the agreement (Thomas, 2020). In addition to these attacks, the Afghan government reported eleven Taliban attacks on March 4 and three Taliban attacks on March 5, 2020. Moreover, the Taliban are alleged to have attacked a

memorial of Shia leader on March 6. However, the Taliban denied the responsibility of any such attacks that caused many casualties (“Casualties feared as gunmen stormed Marzari’s memorial ceremony in Kabul”, 2020). The U.S.-Taliban accord which was signed to assure peace in the country faced such obstacles immediately after it was signed.

Decrease in the U.S. Aid to Afghanistan

The current political impasse in Afghanistan with two parallel governments highly disappointed the U.S. and resulted in a decision to cut \$1 billion U.S. aid to Afghanistan. Mike Pompeo made an unannounced visit to Afghanistan on March 23, 2020, and declared that the U.S. “deeply regrets” that Ghani and Abdullah have proven inept to agree on an inclusive government that can address the challenges Afghanistan is facing. He did not state “when the aid would be cut” but added “that if Washington wasn't satisfied with progress in Afghanistan, another \$1 billion would be cut in 2021” (Neuman, 2020). This announcement came to increase the pressure over rival Afghan leaders to reach a compromise after Taliban talks stalled. This step further added to the despairs of Afghanistan.

The Afghan Military Forces

The law-and-order situation has been the most important issue in Afghanistan. The Afghan military forces lack the professional training required to maintain law and order in the country. Since 2001, the U.S. and NATO forces have been in the country, countering terrorist attacks and violence carried out by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. According to the 2018 statistics, there were 12,000 U.S. forces in Afghanistan, 8,000 of which were part of the NATO mission. These forces have been helping the Afghan force since its inception in 2015 (Fine, 2018). However, according to the peace deal signed between the U.S. and the Taliban, the U.S. has announced a withdrawal from the state within fourteen months. After the complete withdrawal of the U.S. forces, the law-and-order situation became a serious challenge to the security forces of Afghanistan who already lacked professionalism and training. Moreover, in the absence of the Intra-Afghan peace accord, the situation became even more challenging because the Taliban are still carrying out attacks in the country, targeting the local population of Afghanistan.

IV. Challenges for Pakistan

Pakistan, the immediate neighbor of Afghanistan actively participated in the Doha Accord, reiterating its full support for the ongoing endeavor for achieving lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan is in dire need of mending its approach towards Afghanistan and to converge its focus on the social and economic potential of Afghanistan. Pakistan needs to play an active role in order to address the stigmas associated with its role in Afghanistan over the last several decades. First is the issue of the Durand line which was established in 1893 with mutual consensus between Afghanistan and the British. It was mutually agreed upon by the parties that the agreement will be enforced for the next 100 years. This provides the foundation to “Pashtun irredentism” as they are advocating the restoration of these territories as part of Afghanistan instead of Pakistan. This is cultivating seeds of hatred and serving as a major contributor to the increasing divide between both sides. Secondly, the approach of Pakistan towards Afghanistan as its strategic depth that ignores the viability of Afghanistan as an ally or a political and economic entity has increasingly forced the Afghan government to become suspicious of Pakistan’s intentions leading to distrust between both states. Thirdly, the growing interest and investment of India in Afghanistan to create its dominance in the realm of hegemonic stability has heightened the threat for Pakistan and its vulnerability to a two-front war. Fourthly, the role of the Afghan Taliban and their approach towards modernity, fair play, and governance further limit the crucial bilateral cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Fifthly, the ethnic divide alongside the absence of a central unitary force that can glue Afghans as one formidable nation can prolong and even curtail any process of intra-Afghan dialogue. The failure of this process can lead U.S. to a zero-sum game ending the hope for a silver lining. The north-south divide within Afghanistan cannot be overlooked with the Taliban as the new dominant factor on the political stage. Sixthly, political instability with two parallel governments is enough to add further confusion and damage the national image as a frail and scattered nation divided into bits and pieces lacking the ability to cope with problems. Lastly, the threat to peace by the strong presence of Al-Qaeda and ISIS who continuously target innocent civilians further gets in the way of fostering a relationship between both Pakistan and Afghanistan on a broader spectrum.

Both Pakistan and Afghanistan must understand that the contemporary global scenario is charged with non-linearity which is not random but chaotic in its true essence, leaving no space of survival for those who could not comply with continuous alteration

in their existing status. Moreover, the idea that knowledge and power alone can help U.S. to predict future discourse has now proven to be a beaten track. The future thereof remains uncertain and doubtful. If the challenges are dealt with by required enthusiasm and efficiency, both Pakistan and Afghanistan can achieve many sustainable development goals.

V. Challenges for the United States

The Afghan war has both posed a strategic dilemma to the U.S. and impacted its reputation as a superpower. The U.S. has been in this war for nearly two decades with no exit strategy, effective action, or even a sign of improvement vis-à-vis the issues faced by Afghanistan. It is important to contemplate why the U.S. has been fighting in a state nearly 12000 km away; if this endeavor has achieved its purpose; or if it has been a complete misadventure consuming financial and military resources and presenting a grim picture of U.S. strategies.

Vague Goals and Lack of Planning

After a legal battle with the U.S. government, *the Washington Post* disclosed secret interviews of high-profile U.S. officials which revealed how dangerously unsure the latter were when it came to Afghanistan and how they lacked a comprehensive plan of action (Whitlock, Shapiro, and Emamdjomeh, 2019). From the beginning, it was clear that the U.S. was not sure of what they were dealing with. The U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld admitted this in a 2003 memo: “I have no visibility into who the bad guys are in Afghanistan or Iraq. We are woefully deficient in human intelligence” (National security Archives, 2003). Douglas Lute, Former United States Permanent Representative to NATO, admitted in an interview that until 2007, the U.S. considered Afghanistan as a “secondary effort”:

We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan - we didn't know what we were doing.... What are we trying to do here? We did not have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking. We never would have tolerated rosy-goal statements if we understood, and this didn't start happening until Obama... There is a fundamental gap of understanding on the front end, overstated objectives, an overreliance on the military, and a lack of understanding of the resources necessary. Gokay 2022, pp.5-8).

This gives shocking evidence revealed after 19 years of war that unveils a directionless military and economic effort by the superpower.

Massive Corruption

The U.S. made heavy investment in the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Till 2018, the cost of war was approximately \$975 billion; the U.S. cumulative expenditure on all wars and anti-terror expeditions was \$2022 billion; and a total expense including an overall expenditure on all military and reconstruction and veteran rehabilitation procedures was \$5.9 trillion (Crawford, 2017). Such a huge cost is bound to damage even a powerful economy like the U.S. and is questioned by the taxpayers when they do not witness any improvement in the situation. But what is worse is that this heavy cost bred corruption in an already corrupt state where the only flourishing economy was the drug economy. This heavy expenditure was made without any detailed plan of reconstruction, and the money went into the hands of the corrupt people. It was revealed in the Afghanistan Papers Document by a Senior USAID official who was a contractor for the U.S. that he was obligated to spend \$3 million daily on a single district and that such an expenditure could never have been carried out responsibly: “that's what you just obligated U.S. to spend, and I'm doing it for communities that live in mud huts with no windows (Whitlock, 2021, p.159). In a country where most of the population is devoid of any awareness as to where their salvation lies, how could the U.S. have expected to develop a democracy or a general hatred for Taliban and insurgents by only providing for material needs. In such circumstances, the money had to end up in the wrong hands with no sign of achievement of any goal.

Lack of Regional Allies

The United States lacked allies in the region. Pakistan could not act as a pawn for the U.S. (Butt, 2019) as Pakistan suffered greatly due to terrorism by insurgent groups that were bred in Afghanistan and the offshoots of the Taliban in the form of Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). At the same time, the U.S. had another war going on in Iraq that occupied ninety percent of its attention (Butt, 2019). This left the U.S. with no strong allies in the region except India. However, India itself had its strategic interests in Afghanistan. The U.S. could not have been expected to reconstruct a peaceful democracy in a nation that is divided against itself, is prone to internal conflicts, is leaning towards religious conflicts, and is also nearly 12000 km away. This was an impossible situation; without regional allies, it became even more complicated.

The ANSF

While the U.S. and NATO emphasize the achievements of the ANSF, the truth is not always revealed. Secret interviews with the U.S. government officials uncovered the inefficiency and unprofessionalism of Afghan National Security Forces. The ANSF, despite heavy training, huge budget, and heavy armor failed to perform its job (Whitlock, 2019). The U.S. Ambassador, Ryan Crocker, told the government about the incompetence of the ANSF in these terms: “not because they’re out-gunned or out-manned. It's because they are useless as a security force and they're useless as a security force because they are corrupt down to the patrol level” (Whitlock, 2021, p.223).

The U.S. was a little too late when it came to building and investing in the ANSF as they should have prioritized it when the Taliban were not very strong. There is a ray of hope now because the ANSF is the main focus, yet there is no guarantee that the ANSF has been cleaned of deserters and corruption. The U.S. continues to heavily invest in the ANSF with the hope of creating enough stability for the troops to come home.

The Power Vacuum

There were speculations that with the withdrawal of U.S. forces, a power vacuum would be created which competitive powers like China and Russia could fill in. This would have serious repercussions for the U.S. Keeping this in view; the U.S. might not completely withdraw its troops and maintain its minimum presence within Afghanistan. Some analysts feared that if complete withdrawal takes place, GoIRA would lose its influence and legitimacy, and power would be delegated to local militias and warlords (Frost, 2010). It would multiply the extremist groups and the country would get back to the 1990s civil war. And that is what transpired.

VI. Role of Spoilers

Despite bringing benefits to some groups, conflicts, when prolonged, tend to become inconclusive. In case of Afghanistan, the flow of aid, drug economy, and the interests of the allied states, never allowed the parties to feel exhausted (Rubin, Ghani, Maley, Rashid, and Roy, 2001). Each party believed that they had the potential to win, but, in reality, no one was winning. As per this theory, warring actors who want the conflict to continue because of financial gains or their ability to gain more power, attempt to derail the ongoing peace process based on dialogue. Such entities must

be dealt with strictly through devising appropriate strategies. International actors set “peace” as a goal when they were least bothered about the consequences of conflict and more about the process of violence. Some powerful groups, who might have lobbies within the governments, have an interest in continuing the war.

War-Fed Local Insurgents

War also fed many in Afghanistan, including the enemy. In fact, the amount of money that went into Afghanistan often found its way to the enemy about which nothing was done. The massive corruption in Afghanistan had led U.S. dollars to be used by insurgents. Not only did the U.S. pay the enemy to get across safely but also hire Taliban soldiers who were cheaper (Mathieu, 2019). Under such circumstances, completely ending a war became even harder because some elements were being fed by the war, and their supplies would have ended with the end of the war. Even when an agreement was signed sincerely by the parties, the implementation of that agreement was challenging without due assurance of security from binding state bodies or those outside the state.

Role of India

India has always had bigger designs in the region and has been trying its best to emerge as a global economy. In Afghanistan, India has always found an ally and a strategic partner. Not only does Afghanistan serve as a geostrategic tool for security and propaganda for India, it also is a door to expand the Indian economy via trade to Afghanistan itself and beyond. But when the peace process is not designed exactly according to Indian preference, the latter chooses to oppose it or remain neutral. Indeed, India has always been against the Taliban and considered them unworthy of holding dialogues with. Given that the peace deal was proposed by the U.S., India was put in a situation that countered its longstanding policies.

Indian Agenda to counter Pakistan

India has looked for opportunities to use the rift between Afghanistan and Pakistan to strengthen its own ties with Afghanistan, but its actions do not seem to align completely with their narrative. India as a regional power seized the opportunity of U.S. presence in Afghanistan and the U.S. also considered India as a better ally in the region given the U.S. mistrust of Pakistan. India invests heavily in Afghanistan to gain support and is one of the

primary donors to Afghan reconstruction (Afifa, 2009). But what makes India the spoiler now is some of its primary objectives to derail Pakistan from the CPEC projects and to use porous Afghan border to not only spy on but also cause unrest in Pakistan. For this purpose, it also facilitates certain terrorist organizations like Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in carrying out their plans (Akhtar, 2019). India has interests that are deep-rooted and far-sighted, and Afghanistan is a major geostrategic tool to pursue those interests. In this context, India cannot be trusted entirely to support a thorough peace process.

Afghanistan as a Route to Central Asia

India has been interested in reaching the Central Asian states and their rich energy reserves via Afghanistan. For this purpose, it has been investing heavily in the Chabahar port in Iran (Naz and Jaspal, 2020). India admits to being on the road to building its economy, and this route would bring it closer to its ambitions. However, due to the growing U.S.-Iran tension, India has downscaled its investment in the Chabahar port from \$1.5 billion to \$6.5 million. This, of course, upsets the Indian plans, and their role in Afghanistan's future also become unclear.

Indian Dissatisfaction with the Peace Talks

India has never wanted any direct or indirect contact with the Taliban. Instead, it has stood by the Afghan government in the times of President Karzai as well as President Ghani. It is also clear that India did not want the U.S. to be negotiating with the Taliban and, in fact, welcomed the cancellation of talks when President Trump signaled it in a tweet (Begg, 2020). India views the peace deal as a short-sighted strategy focusing on the American withdrawal and not on the future planning of the Afghan government. Surely, India is also resistant to this because negotiating with the Taliban would mean that they also get some demands approved which is not an acceptable scenario for India. India fears that the Taliban presence in Afghanistan poses a threat to Kashmir in particular and India in general. India is also not pleased with Pakistan's active role in the peace deal, which has resulted in their sidelining the whole process (Kaura, 2019). Regardless of the nature of the peace deal, India has its interests in Afghanistan that limit the security and peace options within Afghanistan.

VII. Lessons Learned

Throughout the U.S.-Afghan war focused on eradicating terrorism and bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan, pitfalls continued to emerge. Some of the past mistakes listed below must be considered before devising the future course of action by the policymakers:

- Relying on a military solution has wasted immense resources for the U.S. Therefore, the focus, in the future, should be on a political solution along with a humanitarian plan to restore durable peace in Afghanistan.
- The U.S. had made only tactical gains by ousting the Taliban regime based on which it propagated its initial victory. On the contrary, a coherent strategy based on real and achievable objectives that keep in view public opinion and national interests is required in the future.
- Afghanistan should utilize its available resources skillfully to come out of its dependence on the international community; to give a boost to its economy; and to stand on its own feet. There is a need for Afghan-led and Afghan-owned solutions in the absence of which foreign intervention will continue. A mutual effort must be set forth to understand the position of all the parties to the conflict. Some credible mechanisms must be developed to implement what is decided under the empowered states who can play a constructive role to monitor decision execution.
- Regional countries have conflicting interests. However, being a comity of nations, they should give priority to Afghanistan's interest in bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan, for a peaceful Afghanistan is the interest of the majority.

VIII. The Way Forward

National Level

At the national level, top leadership should play its role to minimize the internal differences among various tribes. They should also focus on strengthening the institutions and take steps for constitutional reforms. They need to take the lead in addressing the misgovernance plaguing Afghanistan. Some development plans must be designed to bring Afghanistan back into the community of peaceful nations. Civil Society should be empowered and given due consideration so that Afghans can play a role in determining their future. Moreover, a strong civil society can watch the peace

talks and become the stability retainers after the U.S. leaves. The reconciliatory and rehabilitation process can only be successful if common people's representatives and protectors of their rights step forward and be part of the process that has so far been dominated by warring actors.

Regional Level

Regional states and institutions should do their best to attain peace and stability in Afghanistan and to push the Taliban to comply with the obligations of the peace deal. The U.S. and the NATO should continue to provide financial and technical support to ensure security in Afghanistan. However, regional states should also take the lead in addressing complex socio-economic issues underlying Afghanistan. Along with this, regional spoilers should also be recognized and handled well. Pakistan and Afghanistan should work on areas of mutual interest like the tapping of mineral resources, poverty alleviation programs, plantation, etc. Pakistan can provide help to Afghanistan in these areas that will improve its economic condition. It is time for Pakistan to extend its influence and ties to Afghan forces. This will lessen misunderstanding and suspicion of each other. It will also reduce the dependence of Afghanistan on India and will help Pakistan to positively enhance its circle of influence and coordination in the region.

International Level

International powers should continue to provide a consistent flow of aid to Afghanistan to allow it to become independent by fostering a stable economy, credible institutions, a powerful constitution, etc. As per the estimates of World Bank, Afghanistan will require \$4.6-\$ 8.2 billion per year till 2024 (McCausland, 2020) to manage its affairs. International powers should remain intact with the government of Afghanistan to identify and control the insecurity drivers in the country by developing peaceful means of settlement and by educating the masses to promote peace and development. The international community should change its approach of "one size fits all" and engage with Afghan citizens to ensure that the U.S. funding is used for the right purposes by the right people.

IX. Conclusion

Afghanistan, known as "the graveyard of empires," has never been an easy ground for any players whether the Soviets in the 20th century, the British in the 18th and 19th century, or the U.S. in the 21st century. Like the previous invasions, this time also

Afghanistan has proven to be a hard ground and has not allowed victory to either party. It is the right time for all the stakeholders to give up their unrealistic demands and sit together for a political settlement by giving due representation to all, including the Taliban, in the national government. This war was started as a “Just War”; however, it turned into the longest war in the U.S. history. Now Afghanistan will have to pay a huge price in the post-war era for many years for the restoration of peace and the tackling of domestic challenges. The only salvation of any nation lies in their unity, for if they stand against one another, they will be subdued by a third force. Especially when states like India demand a stronghold in Afghanistan in the form of their government, the options for peace in Afghanistan become limited in terms of their foreign policy as well as domestic representation of different ethnicities. The U.S. and the international community should continue to support Afghanistan politically, economically, financially, and logistically. The U.S.-Taliban deal carries the deceptive look of a peace deal, but it is merely a withdrawal deal of U.S. wrapped in a nice cover while leaving behind another huge power vacuum and power struggle in an already unstable Afghanistan. At best, this deal is just the beginning of the end to an endless war. It has yet to be seen how the clauses agreed upon in the deal are going to be enforced and if it will pave the way for the attainment of real peace in Afghanistan.

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