



Vivekananda International Foundation

Revival of Peace Initiatives in Afghanistan: Implications for India

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Published by Vivekananda International Foundation.

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Introduction

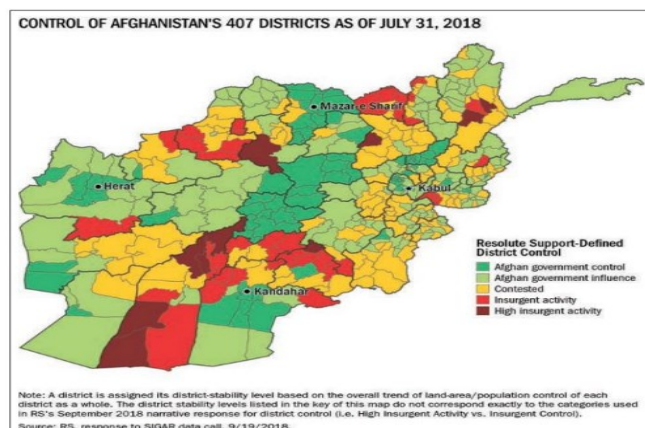
Seventeen years have passed since the American forces entered Afghanistan in October 2001 and ousted the Taliban. The massive crackdown forced the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban leaders to melt into Pakistan, where they replenished their depleted forces to restart the war on the western forces and the nascent Afghan government. The last few years have been among the most violent ones and there is no clear end to the war insight. In addition, the entry of Islamic State (IS)-Khorasan in Afghanistan has created a decision paralysis amongst the stakeholders. There seems to be an emerging consensus amongst some of the stakeholders that the Taliban has to be part of the peace process.

In the last few months, there have been four near-simultaneous initiatives by the US, Russia and President Ghani led National Unity Government (NUG) to commence the peace process in Afghanistan. While each of the three stakeholders is looking at favourable outcome for themselves, they are converging on the proposition that Taliban has to be involved in the peace process.

This paper attempts to analyse the various factors influencing the current initiatives and the interest of the various stake holders in the peace process.

Current Scenario: Mixed Indicators

Fatigued or Indomitable Taliban: Assessment of Taliban's Strength. According to the Long War Journal¹ and BBC², the Taliban today has gained initiative over the Afghanistan National Defence Security Forces (ANDSF).³ In Apr 2018, Taliban launched their annual spring offensive which they called 'Al Khandaq', after a historic battle fought by the Prophet Muhammad—as a campaign to “crush, kill, and capture” invading the US forces and their allies while avoiding harm to civilians (sic)⁴. Since launch of the offensive, Taliban is attempting to control the key Afghan highways and are conducting targeted assassinations across the country. They have been using storming tactics to overtake the isolated and weakly held government outposts. They have made important territorial gains and now have complete or partial control over some 250 of about 400 districts⁵. Taliban, today with the conservative estimate have approximately 70,000 fighters. It controls approximately 30 percent and is fighting actively over other 40 percent of the territory of Afghanistan. In the last few months it has been able to inflict heavy casualties on the ANDSF.



Source: SIGAR October 30, 2018, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress.

The official figure for casualties of ANDSF is classified, as per the SIGAR report of Oct 2018.⁶ This is being done to prevent an adverse effect on morale of ANDSF troops. As per data quoted by *New York Times*⁷ the average casualty figures for the ANDSF for the year have been approximately 25 to 30 per day. This casualty figure is very high by any standards and will be difficult for any force to sustain. There are also reports of desertions from the ANDSF lower ranks.

“The Afghan army has taken severe casualties over the last year and a half. They’ve stayed in the field - fighting.”

—Secretary James Mattis

Source: DOD, “Secretary Mattis Media Availability at the Pentagon,” 9/24/2018.

At the same time, Taliban has been short of their claim to win all the provinces, wherein they have not been able to extend their influence any further since end 2017. While Taliban leadership has claimed ‘Al Khandaq’, to be a huge success, however, on ground they have desisted from attacking the US forces and rather have targeted the so-called ‘Arbakai’—local militias assigned to protect pro-government rural areas.⁸ Taliban too has been suffering casualties.⁹ Taliban was not able to hold on to the early success it achieved at Ghazni and failed to achieve its military objective.¹⁰ Defence Secretary Mattis said Taliban was now willing to negotiate as they cannot avoid it any more.¹¹ The US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, had recently said in an interview that Taliban has accepted that political settlement is the only option as Taliban cannot win the war.¹²

The situation seems to be heading to a stalemate wherein Taliban too is showing a fatigue factor and appearing to be inclined towards negotiations. This is evident from the apparent change in the stance of Taliban, wherein earlier, the pre-condition to talk was ‘complete withdrawal of American forces’; however, in last three months the Taliban representatives have not only met the US special advisor Zalmay Khalilzad three to four times but also participated in the Moscow Dialogue. Taliban earlier had been insistent on having a dialogue only with the US and been rejecting all proposals of a negotiation with Afghanistan Government. After the recent dialogue at UAE with the US, Saudi Arabia and UAE officials, Taliban has conveyed that they will attend the next round of talks in Jan 2019, but there will be no talks with Afghanistan Government.¹³ However, in the first week of January 2019, Taliban called off the next round of talks which were scheduled to be held at Qatar. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid had conveyed that talks were to focus on US withdrawal, prisoner exchange and the lifting of ban on movement of Taliban leaders.¹⁴ This change in stance by Taliban may be attributed to their getting more confident consequent to announcement of withdrawal of 7000 US troops.

Relevance of National Unity Government (NUG). The NUG led by President Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah is in disarray. There have been high profile resignations, like by Hanif Atmar, who stepped down from the National Security Advisor’s position. Atmar has now announced his candidature for the presidential election. Earlier, the Vice President Dostum, an Uzbek, left Afghanistan after leveling allegations on President Ghani of unduly favouring Pashtuns. Later, several senior government officials of different ethnic communities announced formation of ‘Coalitions for Salvation of

Afghanistan' (Ankara Coalition) demanding implementation of political reforms.¹⁵ Recently, President Ghani included Asadullah Khalid and Amrullah Saleh in the government on key posts. Both are veterans of Afghan War and are staunch opponents of Taliban and the role being played by Pakistan. This step, while will strengthen the position of President Ghani, but could further complicate the peace process.¹⁶

President Ghani has been of the opinion that negotiations with Taliban be within the purview of the constitution. However, Taliban has not responded as they don't consider the NUG as a legitimate government. The recent initiatives by the US and Russia have somewhat sidelined the NUG as they have started negotiating with the Taliban. Considering the developments, President Ghani has constituted a new 12-member Committee to hold peace talks with the Taliban¹⁷ while attending a two-day conference on Afghanistan at the UN Headquarters at Geneva. He also said that any implementation of agreements will take minimum five years. While the four tenets of equal rights for women, primacy of constitution, functioning of ANDSF as per law and no role for terrorist organisations have a universal appeal, the Taliban accepting these as pre-conditions for any meaning full talks is highly unlikely. This Committee is in addition to the existing High Peace Council (HPC) established in 2010, which also had the mandate to negotiate with Taliban, but did not achieve much on ground.

In further development, the five major political parties, including the Jamiat-e-Islami, have made their own negotiating teams to talk to the Taliban with the aim to maintain their relevance.

The Afghan National Army (ANA). ANDSF has evolved into a professional army with modern weapons and equipment. The strength of ANDSF is approximately 2, 96,400, which includes both Afghan National Army and the Police force¹⁸. The most potent arm of the force is the Afghan National Army Special Operations Corps (ANASOC) which is approximately 17000 strong and is undertaking missions independently of coalition advisors, support mechanism and enablers. The troops have been equipped with NATO origin of weapons and equipment which include M-16 Assault rifles, night vision devices, Humvees and UH 60 Black Hawks which are likely to be inducted shortly.¹⁹ ANDSF, today has an air force which is generating more than 100 close support missions. However, the proposition of the US withdrawal and reduction in the foreign aid raises questions on the future of the ANDSF.

Recently, President Ghani said that if American support is withdrawn, the ANDSF will not be able to survive for more than six months²⁰. The ANDSF is primarily being funded by the US and its allies. It has evolved into a cohesive fighting force; however, high casualties, increased desertion and reduction in funding has affected its morale. The present strength is the lowest since 2012 and 10 percent lesser than in 2015²¹.

There are other serious issues with respect to the future of ANDSF if Taliban is formally inducted into the government. What would be the status of the ANDSF there on? Will the Taliban cadre, ex-Taliban fighters be joining ANDSF formally, or will it remain an

extra-constitutional authority to enforce their law as they did post-capitulation of the Najibullah government.

The Nepal format is one such case study, where in, when the Maoist joined the government; the military wing of Maoist party was to merge with the Nepal Army, which was deeply contested. Even after so many years only a selective amalgamation has taken place²². This is, when Nepal is a much more homogeneous society when compared to Afghanistan. Such an arrangement may not be practical at all in Afghanistan, where there are severe ethnic and ideological divisions - within ANDSF itself the lower ranks is dominated by Tajiks, whereas Taliban is dominated by Pashtun. The possibility of ANDSF disintegrating into ethnic factions after the Taliban comes to power cannot be ruled out. This may lead to another civil war which will be more dangerous as now the weapons and ammunitions are much more lethal than what they were 1996. A recent report in the *Diplomat* gives out how at some places, Taliban has been able to capture weapons from ANDS forces.²³ The practical aspect of sustaining the ANDSF post-withdrawal of US forces and Taliban coming into power needs to be deliberated during the negotiations. This is probably the most important issue, as for a country like Afghanistan a strong central security force is mandatory. A disintegrated ANDSF led by ethnic war lords will be threat to entire region.

Economic State of Afghanistan. According to CIA world fact-book, revenues earned by the NDU Government in 2017 were approximately \$ 2.276 billion, whereas the expenditure was approximately \$ 5.238 billion²⁴. This deficit is being primarily pooled in by the donor countries. Economic development is pivotal to Afghanistan's long-term stability, though indicators of future growth are cause of concern. An analysis by Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on economic state of Afghanistan brings out that Afghanistan's GDP grew steadily from 2002 till 2015. However, the GDP growth decelerated sharply following the departure of most of the US and NATO troops in 2015. Growth fell from 14.4 percent in 2012 to 1.3 percent in 2017 and is projected to be about 2.3 percent in 2018²⁵. The IMF projects 3 percent growth for 2019. The progress that Afghanistan has made since 2002 till 2015 can be contributed more to a better secured environment being provided by the US led allied forces and ANDSF and less to the governance. Now with talks of the US withdrawing completely and considering the ability of the ANDSF alone to provide a secured environment required for economic development, the future growth may just be a wishful thinking.

As international support in the last few years has seen a steep drop, the budget allocation has reduced since 2012. President Trump's FY 2019 budget requests \$5.2 billion for the ANDSF, \$500 million in Economic Support Funds, and smaller amounts to help the Afghan Government with tasks like combating narcotics trafficking. This is roughly 300 percent drop from 2012.²⁶ The envisaged peace process and the negotiations need to ensure a continued economic aid for stable Afghanistan and requirement of international efforts to make Afghanistan self-reliant.

Trump's South Asia Strategy: Pressure on Pakistan. The long-term strategy of the US for providing financial and military aid to Pakistan underwent a change in 2018, with the US initially cancelling the military aid worth \$300 million and later putting the pressure through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). This has been carried out with the aim of coercing Pakistan to get the Taliban on board for peace negotiations in Afghanistan. Appointment of Zalmay Khalilzad as the special advisor on Afghanistan and his engagements with the international stakeholders and Taliban's Doha²⁷ office on October 12, and later at UAE in presence of representatives from Saudi Arabia and UAE in December 3rd week²⁸, indicate the ultimate aim of Trump administration to have an early and respectful exit from Afghanistan²⁹. Recently as per reports of New York Times³⁰, President Trump has declared a partial withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. According to the report the withdrawal would be of about 7000 troops which is almost 50 percent of the current US deployment. This announcement of partial withdrawal could be a potential bargaining chip by the US to get Taliban agree to their concerns. The decision to withdraw US troops will have severe consequences on the operations against Taliban as it will affect the C4SIR, air, cyber and ANDSF operations. It may also boost up the Taliban confidence while having adverse impact on the morale of ANDSF.

President Trump may be looking at some sort of solution or at least a framework for withdrawal of the US forces before the 2020 US elections, as it was one of his promises in the last election campaign. There has been clear divergence of viewpoints amongst the policymakers in White House on this issue, which got exposed with the resignation by James Mattis on December 20, 2018.³¹ While America's aim is to disengage from Afghanistan, at the same time it would also aim to keep a foothold in the region to retain the relative strategic advantage it has built so far.

The issue of the US exit raises more questions than attempts to solve the problem. What is the opportune time to exit? What would be the governmental set up at the time of exit? What will happen to the ANDSF? Will it remain effective without the financial and advisory support of the US? Will the US forces exit in totality or would some elements be left behind? What would be the role of the US forces that are left behind and what would be their mandate? These are some of the pertinent issues which need to be deliberated before any American withdrawal plan is finalised.

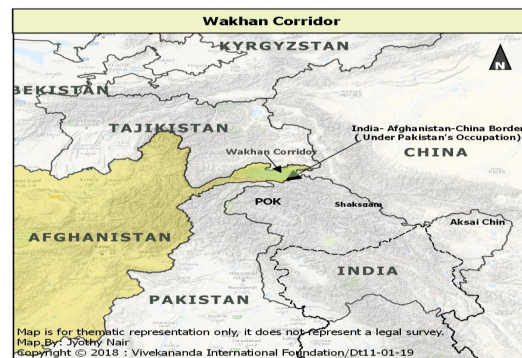
Russian Initiatives in Afghanistan. On November 09, 2018, Moscow organised regional consultations on Afghanistan³² with Taliban's Qatar office which were attended by officials from the US, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, including the representatives of the Afghan HPC. This was the first time that the Taliban and the representatives of the Afghan Government (though in non-official capacity) were sitting at the same table. American efforts to bring Taliban and Afghan Government at negotiating table have been stuck as Taliban does not consider the NUG as a legitimate entity. On the other hand, Russia has been promoting six-party consultations on Afghanistan for the past several years. The last meetings were held in February and April 2018 involving Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Iran, India and the

Central Asian republics. The US was invited but did not attend. However, the November 9th consultations were attended by the representative of the US Embassy in Moscow.

The Russian strategy in Afghanistan is probably directed at meeting two aims. The first is to protect Russia from Islamic terrorism, wherein Taliban has emerged as its ally in fighting IS-Khorasan which Russia sees as a potential threat. The second aim is to make the exit cost prohibitive for the US, thereby avenging the Soviet exit in 1988-89.

China's Interest in Afghanistan The Chinese interest is driven by providing security to Belt and Road (BRI) projects and also to prevent any ingress of Islamic terrorism in Xinjiang. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a pivot of the China's Afghanistan policy, under which Beijing has pledged \$60 billion to build power stations, major highways, new and upgraded railways and higher capacity ports to help turn Pakistan into a major overland route linking Western China to the world. Officials from China, Pakistan and Afghanistan met recently on December 15, 2018³³ to discuss trade, development and solutions to end the region's relentless conflicts.

There are reports of China having buildup military infrastructure in the Wakhan Corridor of Badakhshan Province and has deployed People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops of up to a battalion strength. There are also reports of joint patrolling along the narrow stretch of common border between Afghanistan and the Xinjian region of China, by the PLA and ANA troops.³⁴ The physical domination of this narrow stretch is a prerequisite for China to control or prevent the movement of cadres of Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) or East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). China hopes to restrict the entry of extremist Islamist Uighurs in to China by collaborating with Taliban and towards that it was one of the first countries to recognise the Taliban as a legitimate stakeholder in any peace process for Afghanistan. The Taliban representative who visited China was received with diplomatic protocol. China's preference would be to involve the Taliban in formation of the interim government and to have a larger role for Pakistan in the peace process.



Relevance of Pakistan. In the ever changing geopolitical dynamics in Afghanistan, the only constant is the relevance of Pakistan. In the last 40 years, Pakistan has been able to strengthen its hold over the Pashtun community which will keep them relevant for a long time to come. The complete hierarchy in Taliban and other relevant terrorist groups in the region owe their allegiance to Madrasas and other such agencies of Pakistan. Hence, any process to achieve peace in the region will have to involve Pakistan. In this entire game, Pakistan will aim to increase its influence in the government formation in Kabul, keep India out on the periphery and continue to retain control over the Islamist terrorist groups, while maintaining good relations with the US, Russia and China at the same time.

The American strategy of carrot and stick seems to be getting Pakistan in a flux. On the one hand, Trump has been putting Pakistan under pressure through reducing the financial military aid, getting FATF and IMF to restrict the space for Pakistan and now recently downgrading Pakistan in list of countries infringing upon religious freedom³⁵. This downgrade means Pakistan could now be hit with more US sanctions. On the other hand, Trump writes a letter to Prime minister Imran Khan to facilitate the dialogue with Taliban. US special advisor visits Pakistan thrice in the recent times to seek Pakistan's interference in the peace process in Afghanistan³⁶. This carrot is seemingly to provide cover for the retreat of the US forces from Afghanistan in a peaceful manner; well, this favour to the US may be the best leverage that has been available to Pakistan in the recent times³⁷. In the proposition of US withdrawal, the role of Pakistan will become pivotal and US dependency will increase on Pakistan to protect its interest. If Prime minister Imran Khan plays his cards well, he may be able to steer his country out of the IMF and FATF crisis³⁸.

There seems to be no other way for Pakistan but to facilitate the Afghanistan peace process on the terms of the US. Shifting of venue for dialogue to UAE and inclusion of Saudi Arabia and UAE in the process is another smart move by the US to put a three-pronged pressure on Pakistan to play the game by the rules.³⁹

Iran's Support to Taliban. Iran has been supporting Taliban with weapons and financial aid with the aim to counter American influence as well as to fight the IS-Khorasan. Iran's interest lies in a stable Afghanistan as more than two million refugees from Afghanistan have further aggravated its deteriorating economic and unemployment situation⁴⁰. On December 30, a Taliban delegation visited Iran to discuss peace and stability in Afghanistan.⁴¹ Iran will support a role for Taliban in the peace process and subsequently in the government.

The Roadmap to Peace

The universally accepted position for any peace process has been that it must be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. However, in the new great game that is being played between the major powers in Afghanistan, Taliban has emerged as an indispensable player and NUG is being sidelined. But even before a dialogue is initiated, conditions like ceasefire and the framework for reconciliation or a formulation of interim government have to be met.

Ceasefire. It is a precondition for any peace process to start. Taliban, by agreeing to and abiding by the ceasefire for three days in June 2018, indicated a hope for initiation of the peace process. However, it declined the offer by President Ghani for a three-month ceasefire on the grounds that the US was attempting to prolong their stay in Afghanistan in the garb of promoting truce. Maybe there is a case for the next Bonn conference, as the one in 2011, which couldn't make headway because of lack of participation from Pakistan and Taliban⁴². Now, with Pakistan and Taliban both apparently keen to participate in the peace process, a conference similar to Bonn 2001, may be able to find a way through the deadlock.

Negotiations. Kabul is of the firm view that any negotiations with Taliban will be under the purview of the constitution, whereas the Taliban doesn't consider the NUG as the legitimate government of Afghanistan⁴³. Taliban is only interested in talking to the US and that too on the condition of total withdrawal. However, Khalilzad's recent meeting with the Taliban at Doha may indicate a change in the latter's views. Also, for the first time, the Taliban attended a diplomatic conference in Russia on 9th Nov, this year. However, there needs to be clarity on the issues for negotiation - is it with respect to the US withdrawal or is it regarding the terms of participation by the Taliban in formation of the interim government, or is it with respect to the constitution?

Elections. The presidential elections were scheduled for Apr 20, 2019; however, now have been postponed to Jul 20, 2019 as announced by Independent Election Commission⁴⁴. These elections are crucial for the Afghan democracy. The relatively peaceful conduct of the Wolesi Jirga elections this year have been a positive indicator for the trust and confidence that the Afghan people have shown in the democratic processes. The elections in the districts controlled by the Taliban and participation of a record number of women (more than 400) as candidates are other indicators that show that the Afghans are tired of the prevailing stalemate and seeking for peace now. However, Taliban remains fundamentally opposed to any kind of elections calling it un-Islamic⁴⁵.

The proposition of conduct of presidential election also creates the Catch-22 situation. As it is important to have an election for a democratic set up, but post-election, lack of clear mandate may lead the country into a bigger and dirtier chaos. To integrate Taliban into the governmental functioning, before conducting the election, is another option that may be considered. However, this option has its inherent complexities, as the formation of interim government with Taliban may not be under the purview of the constitution, hence a via media would have to be worked out.

Constitution. The Afghan Constitution of 2004, which granted equal rights to all citizens irrespective of their ethnic or religious orientations, was duly rejected by the Taliban. Even the current peace process announced by President Ghani states that the peace process needs to be under the purview of the Constitution; however, it provides some flexibility in terms of being open to any amendments to it. The key issue is whether the Taliban would agree to negotiate under the purview of the Constitution? This remains the core issue. So far, the Taliban has not shown any deviation or a compromise on their stated view. So, the moot question is, are the stakeholders keen to negotiate with the Taliban on their terms and are willing to see an Afghanistan-ruled state by a setup that existed between 1996 and 2001?

Paradox of Current Peace Process: Recognition of a Terrorist Troup as Legitimate Political Force. Taliban was declared as a terrorist organisation as per UN Security council resolution 1267 in 1999⁴⁶. However, in last few years, most of the stakeholders in Afghanistan have resorted to talking and negotiating with Taliban. While, there were a few governments which recognised the Taliban government during 1996 to 2001 period, however world at large considered Taliban as one of the most dreaded terrorist

organisations and did not recognise the government in Afghanistan. Events of last few years in Afghanistan, and more so in 2018, establish a new and a worrying trend in international relations and law of governance. The enthusiasm of the US and Russia to engage with Taliban raises the stature of the terrorist organisation to a legitimate political force. Earlier in Jan 2015, the White House Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz sparked the Taliban characterisation controversy when he said that Taliban are “armed insurgents,” not “terrorists.”⁴⁷

The paradox of the current peace process initiative is that the protagonist itself can never accept peace. Taliban played football with human skulls when they were in power, the status of women during Taliban rule doesn't need an elaboration. It is an organisation that doesn't believe in constitutional governance but in caliphate; how can it be ever brought to participate in an interim government? Taliban doesn't believe in values like elections or democracy or women empowerment, so how can it ever be a popular government? Will Taliban change their ideology if they come into power? What happens after Taliban comes to power? Who will take the guarantee that Taliban will behave as per universal norms? While it is difficult to find the answers to these questions, but for now Taliban seems to be winning the psychological battle.

Role for India

What role can India play in the Afghan settlement? India has provided aid of more than three billion US dollars since 2001. The Indian assistance range from construction of parliament building, roads, power projects, hospitals, university to training of army and civilian officers. The Indian initiatives have been received very well by a common Afghani citizen. More areas of soft power like education, technology, expertise in institution building, digital governance, agriculture and medical science may be explored further.

India, while supporting the recent peace initiatives, will have to maintain her old connections. India's linkages with Northern Alliance and Tajiks have served India's interest in past. Today Tajiks may be falling out to Pashtun dominated Taliban. Hence any overt support to Taliban favored initiative may lose India its old friends in Afghanistan. India needs to maintain its goodwill with Tajiks and get Iran's and Russian support to make Tajiks relevant again. A stronger presence of Tajiks in interim government in Afghanistan is not only in India's long-term interests but also good for Afghanistan. India's participation in the peace talks should be part of its diplomatic efforts, but it will have to trade a balance between the old friendship with Tajiks and emerging reality of Taliban being in government. Any meaningful initiative with Taliban can only progress if Taliban agrees for cease fire and is willing for talks under the purview of the constitution.

On the side line, Indian support to the Pashtun demands on Durand Line issue will address a cause which is dear to Taliban also. Durand Line issue is sensitive to both Pakistan and Afghanistan. India standing by Afghanistan on this issue and its ability to get the international attention on the terrorist camps on the East of Durand line will serve India's strategic interest.

Concerns for India. The following issues are of concern for India:

- US withdrawal should not create a void which will push back Afghanistan into the chaos of pre-2001 era. There needs to be a suitable alternative security structure in place before the exit of the US forces.
- The domination of Afghanistan's policies by the Taliban needs to be seen through the prism of the extremist Islamic ideology, which may not be the best option for the region. In the past, transnational jihadist groups have had safe havens in Afghanistan during the rule of Taliban and made it epicenter of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. During 1996 to 2001, when Taliban rule was supported by Pakistan, Afghanistan had become a safe haven for many terrorist groups.
- The role and structure of ANDSF if Taliban joins the interim government – as to what would be the status of Taliban cadres, will they join the ANDSF or remain extra-constitutional authority.
- Larger role of Pakistan in a peace process for Afghanistan may not be in interest of India in the long run. The Indian interest needs to be protected by active diplomacy.

Prognosis

During the Raisina Dialogue, 2019, held at New Delhi, Ambassador Haqqani said “*Americans don't lose war but lose interest.*” The US is looking for an honorable exit from Afghanistan while retaining a foothold in this strategically important region. The announcement of the partial withdrawal of 7000 US troop may have very serious ramifications. Apart from making the coalition forces in Afghanistan weaker, it will boost up the Afghan Taliban confidence and conviction that their strategy is working and they are winning. This may trigger a more violent offensive by Taliban.

While Russia, Iran and China want the US to reduce its military footprint in the region, but would like the funding to continue. China is relatively a new player but maintains a considerable low profile in providing physical or material support so far. Stability is important for China as it affects the security of the projects of BRI. The current stalemate is the best suited for Pakistan. It would continue to use the crisis in Afghanistan as leverage to get out of the economic crisis.

India's contribution in the region has largely been in form of economic assistance and may limit its direct influence in the future talks. India, to remain relevant, needs to continue the diplomatic engagement with NUG and Tajik groups while participating in the peace initiatives involving Taliban like the Moscow dialogue.

A peace process with overbearing expectations about the Taliban having changed their behaviour, becoming responsible and democratic, may be misplaced at this stage. On the contrary, the Taliban would see any deal as a victory which would embolden them in picking up from where they left in 2001. Hurried exit of the US forces faces with the plausible scenario of pushing Afghanistan into further chaos and fragmentation. The only

looser will the civilian population of Afghanistan who have been caught up in the quagmire of civil war for more than four decades now.

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