
The future of peace in Afghanistan is rooted in lessons from the past

Introduction

Since the late 1970s, Afghanistan has suffered a series of devastating wars that have taken their toll on the country. Several forms of government have been attempted in Afghanistan since its independence from the British in 1919, from constitutional monarchy to republic, to democratic republic with a communist touch, to a totalitarian Islamic emirate, and finally to American imported democracy. However, these governments have not been able to rule the multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural State without resorting to war, infighting and atrocities. With the parties involved in the present day Afghan war ready to sue for peace, a sustainable, inclusive governance plan has to be set in place, in order to avoid repeating mistakes of the past.

Unfortunately it would seem that, to this date, conflict, political turmoil and instability have become the norm in Afghanistan. A multitude of actors have arisen, both national and international, and reaching any type of consensus in the short term would be nearly impossible. As each actor promotes and propagates its own agenda, the battle for control and influence continues, leaving nothing but continuous state of confusion in its wake.

Coup d'état, Revolution and Foreign Invasion

The Saur Revolution and the assassination of Afghanistan's first President Mohammed Daoud Khan is considered the starting point of the country's contemporary troubles. When Daoud Khan bloodlessly overthrew the Afghan monarchy in 1973, he installed a republican regime that was seen as reformative and progressive, yet frictions with the communist parties eventually led to his assassination by members of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Following this, the PDPA came to power but conflict within the party prevented any type of advancement and local insurgencies led to the Soviet Union invading Afghanistan to protect its strategic ally government in December 1979. Subsequently, this invasion led to Mujahideen factions taking up arms against the Soviet invaders. Not only did the Red Army of the Soviets prove to be no match for the Mujahideen's knowledge of the terrain and sheer tenacity, in addition the latter had the financial and material support from countries such as the United States (US), Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. By the time peace accords were finally signed in 1988 and the Soviet Union agreed to withdraw its troops, approximately 9% of the Afghan population had been killed, between 1 and 1.5 million, half of which were civilians. By 1986, 5 million Afghans had fled and were living as refugees in the neighbouring countries of Pakistan and Iran.

Civil War

The accords signed by Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, the US and Pakistan may have ended one conflict, but soon the country was engulfed in another. The puppet government set in place by the Soviets, led by Mohammad Najibullah, the former director of the Afghan Intelligence Agency, struggled to stay in power. The Mujahideen, who had vanquished their common enemy, had now fragmented and Mujahideen commanders-turned-warlords gained strategic advantages and control over territory, owing to the widening power vacuum. When Najibullah resigned and the PDPA's regime disintegrated, an interim government was set up following the Peshawar accords, signed by the various Mujahideen parties. However, this government was doomed from the start, as infighting

persisted and later on a civil war erupted when one of the interim Presidents, Burhanuddin Rabbani of the Jamiat-e-Islami (Jel), refused to step down after his three month term, followed by the invasion of Kabul by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former Mujahideen and leader of the Hezb-i Islami (Hil) who had refused to sign the Peshawar accords as he felt his group was being sidelined in the agreements.

For four years, the divided Mujahideen would fight each other over Kabul, firing rockets into civilian areas, looting homes, raping and killing civilians. Hekmatyar became known as the *Butcher of Kabul*, as his group was responsible for a large part of the war crimes and atrocities committed during the 1992-1996 civil war. A prominent opponent of him was Ahmed Shah Massoud, branded the *Lion of Panjshir*. Massoud had risen to prominence as a tactical genius fighting the Soviets in the 80s, and then became Minister of Defence of the interim government. These two groups were key players in the first few years of the civil war, fighting again on ethnic lines, Jel consisting of a Tajik majority (Tajiks being the second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan) and Hil consisting of a Pashtun majority. India, which had steered clear of the Soviet-Afghan war, had strengthened relations with Rabbani's interim government. India, along with other international democracies, supported the Northern Alliance, formed by Massoud to fight against the Taliban. Massoud, alongside leaders from all ethnicities of Afghanistan, addressed the European Parliament in Brussels in 2001, asking the international community to provide humanitarian aid to the people of Afghanistan and stated that without the support of Pakistan and Osama Bin Laden, the Taliban would not be able to sustain their military campaign for up to a year. Pakistan supported Hekmatyar and the Hil, drawing upon their Pashtun brotherhood – 15% of the Pakistani population is ethnic Pashtun, living mostly in areas alongside the Afghan border – and later on kept funding, training and supporting the Taliban.

Taliban and US invasion

While the Hil and the Jel, alongside with few more former Mujahideen factions, were fighting each other, a new threat arose across the border in Pakistan – the Taliban. Recruiting former Mujahideen fighters and students from Pakistani madrassas, the majority of which being ethnic Pashtun, Mullah Mohammed Omar would form and lead one of the most radical Islamic groups in modern history from 1994 until his death in 2013. The primary aims of the Taliban were to impose a strict interpretation of Islamic law in Afghanistan, and remove all foreign presence from the territory. This movement attracted numerous Afghans, fed up with decades of wars, foreign interference and ineffective Afghan governments. In the midst of the civil war, the Taliban, receiving backing from the Pakistani military establishment and its intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), started capturing Afghan territory until it finally captured Kabul in September 1996. The Taliban established the *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, which was recognized solely by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Massoud was forced to retreat to the north of Afghanistan and continued the resistance against the Taliban under the flag of the *Northern Alliance*. The cruel treatment of civilians under the Taliban's radical constitution, especially the condition of women, received global condemnation. However, it wasn't until the 9/11 attacks in 2001 that immediate action was taken against them. After the Taliban refused to hand over Osama bin Laden, founder of the terrorist organization Al Qaeda and the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks that claimed almost 3,000 lives, the US invaded and overthrew their regime. Another interim government was then set in place, but the US' war against terror in Afghanistan did not end there. While the Taliban is no longer seated in the capital, it still controls around 50% of the territory. As of today, in some regions of Afghanistan, the Taliban is perceived as the legitimate ruler since it offers social services that the government in Kabul has failed to provide. The Taliban has set up religious courts to resolve disputes and has also allowed schools for girls, which use religious texts, to operate. Paradoxically, the Taliban still conducts acts of terror on a nearly daily basis, victims of which are mainly Afghan civilians, in order to consolidate its power against the Afghan

government, while also holding close ties to other radical groups operating in the country. Despite the Taliban's continuous use of terror tactics, the US, which is eager to end this 18 year long war, has started discussions directly with them in order to negotiate a peace deal. This has many analysts wondering whether after four decades of war and devastation, the Taliban holds the key to peace in Afghanistan?

US-Taliban Talks

In the complexity that has arisen from decades of conflict, with the multitude of actors aligning themselves on ethnic lines and the lack of national Afghan unity, reaching a consensus is proving to be nearly impossible. However, it seems that the future of Afghanistan will be played out by two main internal actors; the Taliban and the Afghan government led by Ashraf Ghani, an independent politician. And yet, there is little to no interaction between the Taliban and the government as the Taliban does not recognize the government as a legitimate entity, and the government does not appreciate the Taliban's political momentum with other States. By engaging in talks with foreign governments and Afghan elites, the Taliban is gaining political credibility that is undermining Ghani's government.

Taliban leaders have attended several rounds of talks with the US in Doha, Qatar. While both sides seem eager to end this war of 18 years, there is one major point of discord which is the timeframe of US troops withdrawal. The Trump administration is willing to start withdrawing troops, as long as the Taliban holds up to its side of the bargain which is to prevent jihadist organizations from operating in the country. The US has also made demands that the Taliban start a dialogue with the Afghan government before they withdraw their troops, something which the Taliban is reluctant to do while only hinting at a potential political discussion with the Afghan government once the US leaves.

If Donald Trump's eagerness to withdraw from Afghanistan precipitates a rash deal with the Taliban, with no sustainable plan for the country and no guarantee that the Taliban will hold up to its end of the bargain, the results could be disastrous. The US presence, as resented as it is by Afghans, does maintain a form of control over the regional status of Afghanistan. Should the US leave Afghanistan in the state that it is today, the country would be up for grabs as regional powers and internal actors would attempt to defend their strategic and regional interests in the country. Afghanistan's immediate neighbours would gain from reconstructing Afghanistan, and lose if another conflict were to erupt from lack of internal political stability. Some of the countries, especially Pakistan and Iran, alongside their dubious role, have also had to manage the spillovers of Afghan wars in the past, in terms of mass refugee influx and the proliferation of terrorist groups aligning themselves on ethnic lines, which do not stop at the established borders. Pashtuns are present in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while Baloch are present in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. If Afghan political powers are unable to suppress terrorist and insurgent groups following the withdrawal of US troops, these groups could draw on ethnic oriented discourses to rally citizens, and Afghan refugees, in neighbouring countries to join their cause, as it has been done in the past.

Afghan Government sidelined

Third party States that are engaged in the peace talks hold the responsibility to include the Afghan government, as leaving it out is an impediment to the peace process. Aside from meeting US envoys in Doha, the Taliban also met with prominent Afghan politicians – including the former president Hamid Karzai – in Moscow in February. The Kremlin was not directly involved in organizing the talks, since this was done by the Afghan diaspora in Russia, yet the country did play a role in facilitating logistics. The talks were held at the President Hotel, owned by the Kremlin, and the ten-member Taliban delegation was authorized to enter the country, despite the Taliban being a designated terrorist organization by the Russian government since 2003. Once again, the legitimate,

democratically elected and internationally recognized government was sidelined, meaning that the agreements that may arise from discussions at the table in Moscow cannot be implemented, unless they are brought to Ghani's government.

The position of the Afghan government regarding the peace process is that it should be "*Afghan-owned, Afghan-led*". Hence, as the US establishes more political talks with the Taliban, while it continues to conduct military operations against it in Taliban occupied territory, Kabul sees this as a betrayal on behalf of their strategic ally, as the US' alienation from the Afghan government contributes to the erosion of Ghani's political presence and undermines his government's legitimacy.

However, Ghani refuses to let his government be pushed aside. And yet, with security and economic conditions having worsened since Ghani's election, the Afghan president and his government are losing ground with the Afghan population and international actors. With the – twice postponed – presidential elections coming up in September this year, if Ghani hopes to be re-elected, he needs to be able to engage in the US-Taliban talks. As direct discussion with the Taliban is a route supported by other nations such as Russia and China, one would argue that it makes little sense for the Afghan government to try and diverge from this path. However, by engaging directly with the Taliban, or at least accommodating them, third party States have now given the Taliban enough confidence in their political momentum, which only reinforces their adamant refusal to accept Ghani's government as a legitimate actor. While the attempts by the US and other international powers to sit across the table with the Taliban in search of the long-elusive peace in Afghanistan, are welcome developments, the absence of insistence that the terrorist outfit eschew violence prior to ushering it onto the table does raise serious concerns, and therefore there should be efforts to bring the Afghan government to the negotiating table. While everyone demands a slice of the Afghan cake, Ghani's government feeds on crumbs and Afghan civilians are once again left to starve.

Regional Interests

The glimmer of hope for the Afghan peace process has caught the attention of other regional actors. As mentioned above, these actors stand to gain from a stable Afghanistan, but only if the government in charge is sympathetic to their interests. One of the regional scenarios that should be taken into account during this peace process is the fact that countries such as Pakistan, China, India, Iran and Russia will compete for influence in Afghanistan.

In addition, Pakistan's close ties with the Taliban cannot be neglected. Hypothetically speaking, if the Taliban was to reach an agreement with the Ghani's government, and potentially become a legitimate political party, where would the Taliban fighters go? Would there be a place for them in the Afghan Army or security forces? Could they be reintegrated into society after all the horrors they have committed? Or would they simply be recruited by terrorist organizations based in Pakistan in order to continue Pakistan's proxy war in Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir as was done with former Mujahideen fighters at the end of the 80s when the Soviets left? There remains a major concern of the risk of thousands of experienced fighters suddenly being unemployed and seeking to join other terrorist factions, moving east into Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir, west into the Middle East and north into Central Asia.

Aside from the military ties between Pakistan and the Taliban, there are economic routes at stake. In theory, Pakistan could provide Afghanistan with access to the Indian market, as Afghanistan provides Pakistan with an access to the Central Asian market. Yet in order to come to an economic agreement, the two governments have to be on good terms, which is not always the case as the neighbours share a strained relationship due to Pakistan's sponsorship of the Taliban.

As for India, its aim is to limit the influence of Pakistan in Afghanistan, as it has preached that the peace process must be “*Afghan-led, Afghan-owned*”, but New Delhi remains weary of the influence the Pakistani military establishment holds over the Taliban and other jihadist groups. India also has economic interests in Afghanistan as it provides the country with an access to Central Asian energy reserves, and the Indian government has been funding aid and infrastructure developments in the country. India’s position is that it advocates for a strong central government, which would be able to counter Pakistani influence. New Delhi has also expressed discontent vis-à-vis the US-Taliban talks, agreeing with the Afghan government’s stance that this undermines the position of the legitimate government in Kabul.

China is keeping an eye on the situation as well as one of its main concerns is the risk of Islamic extremism spilling over into its Muslim majority Xinjiang province where Beijing has been preoccupied in brutally crushing dissent among the Uyghur population. Furthermore, China’s global economic plan known as the *Belt and Road Initiative* requires stable Central- and South Asian regions. So far, Beijing has agreed that the US must withdraw its troops, and the country has also expressed the sentiment that the peace process must be inclusive and Afghan-led. Beijing is well aware that a rapid pull out of American troops could precipitate yet another civil war in Afghanistan which would lead to concerns regarding the stability of South Asia, especially when the future of its *Belt and Road Initiative* is at stake. China’s solution to this is to push forward its objectives at diplomatic platforms such as its own Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Conclusion

Rebuilding Afghanistan will require an unprecedented amount of cooperation, from a multitude of actors which are not known for their negotiation abilities. A rash peace deal, seen as the complete removal of foreign presence without a transition plan, must not be promulgated by the US and the Taliban, since such precipitative actions could again lead to internal conflict.

Nevertheless, it is of paramount importance that foreign actors do not impose their interpretation of a solution on the country; Afghans must decide what type of governance works best for them. Any government set in place must be decided for by all parties to the conflict as the act of marginalizing one could be the catalyst that could precede another civil war.

The reconstruction of the Afghan State should not come at the detriment of its population. Afghan civilians have held the status of collateral damage for 40 years; in a region where an abundance of insurgent and terrorist groups draw on the misery of civilians, the common people’s pain and justifiable grievances must be addressed to truly commence the peace process and recovery of the country.



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