**Pakistan in Afghan Peace Process**

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Whether during the previous War against Terror or the ongoing Afghan Peace Process, Pakistan’s geographical position and social affiliation with the Afghan fraternity have made it too important of a state to ignore. After a long-drawn-out war of approximately 20 years and losses to the tune of almost 1 trillion US dollars, the US has finally endorsed what Pakistan had been reiterating all along. That “war is not a solution to ensure peace in Afghanistan.” The American war had rather strengthened the Taliban in the state. It further compelled the American government to make a U-turn of their objectives–from eliminating the Taliban to bringing them to the table for negotiations.

The peace process would have been impossible without acknowledging the role of Pakistan in the region. After Afghanistan, Pakistan has suffered the most in the global War on Terror in terms of the heavy refugee influx and penetration of terrorists in the state due to its long and porous Western border. Washington praised Islamabad’s involvement in enabling the US’s February 2020 deal with the Taliban and the ensuing intra-Afghan peace talks. However, these discussions came to a halt when President Joe Biden took over the White House in January 2021.

Pakistan has been attempting to encourage its Afghan Taliban supporters to accept a calmly negotiated political solution. But, with increased violence in Afghanistan and a mostly stalled peace process, Pakistan’s concerns have never been greater. A disintegrating Afghanistan would further strengthen Pakistani terrorist organisations, notably the Pakistani Taliban, and risk yet another wave of Afghan refugees. The Taliban continue to use violence to bolster their negotiation position. Kabul, for its part, looks hesitant in making meaningful concessions. Even without a political settlement, Biden’s plan to withdraw all US forces by September 11, 2021, has compressed time frames for a peace process before the war worsens.

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Pakistan benefits greatly from its position as a facilitator in the Afghan Peace Process. It aims to strengthen relations with other countries by returning to the negotiation table with important regional powers. It allows Pakistan to achieve one of its main foreign policy objectives: building a network of regional friends.

Pakistan also intends to collaborate with Afghanistan to combat terror organisations and dispel international accusations of state-sponsored terrorism. This may impact Pakistan’s standing with the Financial Action Task Force and perhaps revive its lost repute; leading to a resumption of international economic ties.

Pakistan’s military leadership and Prime Minister Imran Khan have both consistently maintained that only a political settlement could end the conflict in Afghanistan since intra-Afghan talks began on September 12, 2020, in Doha, Qatar. Accordingly, they pledged support for an Afghan-led peace process while remaining neutral and playing their utmost to restore peace and stability in the war-torn state.

Pakistan has made a determined attempt to remain neutral by refusing to align with any one group: the Taliban or the Afghan government. We chose not to intervene amid a dispute between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Instead, Islamabad publicly welcomed President Ashraf Ghani as Afghanistan’s new leader and conveyed its intention to collaborate closely to restore peace and prosperity in the state. This commitment to a positive outcome from the Intra-Afghan Dialogue has also bolstered Pakistan’s international credibility.

For the first time, our goals and role to achieve peace and security in South Asia coincide with the international community’s objectives. All past attempts to terminate Afghanistan’s long-running and brutally-armed war while stabilising the region have failed. Thus, Pakistan wishes to remove the international community’s misconceptions of it being a state that sponsors terrorism and supplies terrorist groups with safe refuges, intelligence and military support.

On the other hand, the debilitating peace process has produced a feeling of insecurity and chaos in the region. Following the successful conclusion of the peace process and the US’s withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan faces various security problems. The withdrawal of foreign forces opens the way for more powerful extremist organisations in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other neighbouring nations to control the area.

The coming together of these terrorist groups means doom for Pakistan’s national security, especially given the lack of a clear policy following the withdrawal of the US forces. There’s also a risk that a full-fledged civil war could emerge in Afghanistan, with multiple factions backed by regional countries like India and Russia forcing Pakistan back into military conflict.

Following the US-led peace agreement in Afghanistan, the TTP and its associated organisations carried out 12 deadly assaults in Pakistan against Pakistani security personnel. With the imminent withdrawal of soldiers, these banned organisations have discovered new motivations; resulting in an uptick in terror acts. This is a reflection of what is likely to happen when the US leaves Afghanistan.

India, our arch-rival, has always been in the quest of destabilising Pakistan. It may try to seek benefit from the regional security situation and gain support for its propaganda regarding Pakistan being a terrorist supporter. In turn, this would hurt the recently-gained Pakistan’s credibility due to its commendable role as a facilitator and negotiator in the Intra-Afghan Dialogue. Pakistan cannot take any more foreign criticism for failing to “do more” to combat terrorism. Its inclusion on the FATF’s grey list has already harmed its economic and political reputation.

The importance of Pakistan’s engagement in the Afghan Peace Process between the US, the Afghan government, and the Taliban cannot be overstated. The future of regional peace and security hinges on its involvement, which would either stymie or propel the process ahead. However, no state should expect the peace in the region to be restored overnight. It will take time to heal a 20 years-long wounded state. Additionally, Pakistan’s national security difficulties will last for years, being an immediate neighbour and due to its social ties with Afghan Pathan. Therefore, to offset the aforementioned problems, Pakistan must revisit its foreign policy objectives to closely monitor the situation and facilitate accordingly. Moreover, a special focus on restoring bilateral trade and bringing in investment in Afghanistan will restore mutual trust. This will enable both states to protect each other’s economic interests for the sake of prosperity, stability, and peace in the region.

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