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**Pakistan and the Afghan peace process**

On December 2, the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban announced that they had made a breakthrough in the Intra-Afghan Dialogue. The two parties have concluded a written agreement that lays down how the procedure moves for future discussions in the peace process on substantive issues such as a ceasefire.

With the peace process nearing its conclusion, the leading question that comes to mind with regard to Pakistan facilitating the Afghan Peace Process is: what is Pakistan going to get out of a stable Afghanistan? It obviously wants to dispel the international community’s perception of Pakistan as a state-sponsoring terrorism that provides safe haven, intelligence and military aid to terrorist groups. Additionally, Pakistan also wants to improve its relations with major regional powers including Afghanistan, US, Russia, and the European Union.

It is the first time that Pakistan’s hopes and role in attaining peace and security in South Asia aligns with the interests of the international community. All previous attempts at ending the long-drawn and bloody armed conflict in Afghanistan, and stabilizing the region, were unsuccessful. This may be attributable to Pakistan’s previously strong support of a Taliban-led government in Afghanistan. However, it seems Pakistan is done playing favorites in the peace process. A shift towards negotiation and compromise from military initiatives by Pakistan can be seen. In this respect, we see Pakistan’s long-term policies also start to shift.

Pakistan’s role as a facilitator in the Afghan Peace Process is quite beneficial to the state. By being back at the negotiating table with the major regional powers, Pakistan hopes to improve its relations with other states. It provides Pakistan with the opportunity to attain one of its primary foreign policy aims with respect to Afghanistan – to establish a network of regional allies.

Furthermore, Pakistan hopes to work in collaboration with Afghanistan to suppress terror groups and alleviate the international community’s claims of state sponsored terrorism. This has a chance of affecting Pakistan’s position with the Financial Action Task Force, and can also lead to increased trade and possibly the reinstatement of economic aid flowing into the country.

In order to improve its ties with Afghanistan, Pakistan should hope for a friendly government in Kabul. Pakistan has made a concerted effort to appear as a non-biased actor in the Afghan Peace Process by not positioning itself with one party. During a strife between the Afghan government and the Taliban at the Doha negotiations, Pakistan opted to not intervene. Instead, Pakistan formally acknowledged President Ashraf Ghani as the new president of Afghanistan, and expressed its desire to work closely with the Afghan government in the future. This has also improved Pakistan’s credibility before the international community in its commitment to ensuring a propitious outcome from the Intra-Afghan Dialogue.

Improving its bilateral relations with Afghanistan is of utmost importance to Pakistan, in the context of India. Although India may not be an active participant in the peace process, it nonetheless has its own interests in Afghanistan’s stabilization. India has always had good ties with Afghanistan’s elected governments. Its interests in Afghanistan are simply to use its territory to keep a check on Pakistan’s power and influence in the region. By establishing a strong relationship with both the Afghan government and the Taliban, Pakistan can reduce India’s economic, political and security influence in Afghanistan.

Accordingly, Pakistan should hope for a mixed government to be established in Afghanistan. A Taliban-led government may lean more towards Pakistan in the political landscape, but Pakistan should not want them to be in complete control. A 1990s Afghanistan on Pakistan’s western front would lead to the resurgence of terrorism and militancy in the region by empowering terrorist groups in Pakistan such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

However, the peace process has created a false sense of security in the region. The times following a successful conclusion of the peace progress and post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan present a number of challenges for Pakistan’s national security.

The withdrawal of international forces creates a space for stronger militant groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other neighboring countries to try to grab control over the region. We already see this happening. The US declaration of withdrawing troops from Afghanistan by January 15, 2021, has led to different militant groups in Pakistan gravitating towards each other to form an alliance.

The convergence of these terrorist groups only spells disaster for Pakistan’s national security, particularly in light of a lack of comprehensive policy following the US troops withdrawal. There are also chances of a full-blown civil war erupting in Afghanistan with different factions being supported by regional powers such as India and Russia, thus pushing Pakistan back into a state of armed conflict on its western border.

Following the US Afghanistan Peace Agreement, 12 violent attacks were carried out in Pakistan against security forces of Pakistan which are attributable to the TTP and its affiliated groups. These proscribed organizations have uncovered newfound incentives with the looming withdrawal of troops, leading to a sudden rise in the terror attacks. This is a reflection of what post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan would look like for the region.

India may also see the deteriorating peace and security in the region as opportunity to continue pressing its narrative of Pakistan being a state that is sponsoring terrorism. This could prove to be a costly challenge to Pakistan’s credibility post the Afghan Peace Process, which only recently it seems to be regaining due to its due role as a facilitator and negotiator in the Intra-Afghan Dialogue. Pakistan cannot withstand more backlash from the international community for not doing enough in curbing terrorism. Pakistan’s grey-listing in the FATF has already caused considerable damage to its economic and political credibility.

Pakistan’s role in the Afghan Peace Process between the US, the Afghan government and the Taliban is very crucial. The future of peace and security in the region is dependent upon the role Pakistan chooses to play in the Afghan Peace Process – will it hamper or drive the peace process forward.

Pakistan will benefit more from adopting the role of a facilitator in the Afghan Peace Process and a stable Afghanistan. However, it would be foolish to assume that once the peace process concludes, the region would stabilize overnight. The challenges to Pakistan’s national security will continue for years after. Thus, it is imperative that Pakistan adopts a concrete foreign policy in Afghanistan and continues to monitor the socio-economic and political landscape to mitigate the effects of the said challenges.

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