

## **Afghan Peace Deal 2020: Possible Scenarios and Outcomes**

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### **Introduction**

After much deliberations and delays, the US-Taliban peace deal was finally inked on February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (Asia, 2020). The long-awaited peace deal though officially considered as the end of the longest war in US history but does not seem likely to last long. The peace deal focuses on much-debated vital areas such as withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in phases (in 14 months); Taliban not to allow any Al-Qaeda presence or not to provide safe havens to Islamist terrorist groups in Afghanistan; talks between Taliban and Afghan government to begin soon; and, lifting of economic sanctions on the Taliban (US State Department, 2020).

Scholars and researchers on the subject matter issues such as counter-terrorism, Afghanistan conflict, and peace negotiations are divided on the eventual outcome of this deal. Nonetheless, there are high hopes considering the success of this deal. The country has been facing the menace of terrorism and consecutive political violence since 1979, making it one of the oldest ongoing conflicts. Probably, the Afghans have suffered more than any other nation during civil wars, coups/revolutions, foreign invasions, Islamist extremist movements and insurgencies.

Talking about long-awaited peace in Afghanistan sounds like honey to ears, but the question is how to achieve sustainable peace in Afghanistan, which has never been the case at least in the last 40 years. Having a bird's eye view of previous peace deal starting from Geneva Peace talks in 1989, to Peshawar Agreement signed with the aegis of the Pakistani government in 1992, and the subsequent Mecca Accord signed after the mediation of Saudi government; none had yielded the desired results. The survival of this peace deal remains a subject of much consideration. This essay endeavours to analyze possible scenarios in which the peace deal could work or could not work. One could always hope for the best interest of peace but making impractical hopes far from ground realities is never a sound examination of the situation.

### **Scenarios when peace is achievable**

Modern history has witnessed scores of political conflict lasting over the years, and at times decades and even in the grimmest of situations, peace is achieved. Finally, the bloodiest of the political violence ended after negotiations with or without mediations of influencing state and supra-state actors. Though difficult, the case of Afghanistan is no different as far as the resolution of the conflict is concerned. There is a troika of state and non-state actors involved in it like other previous and ongoing conflicts such

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as the Vietnam War, Yugoslav Wars of Succession, Kosovo crisis, the civil war in Rwanda and others.

The US government is, of course, the primary state actor, involved in the conflict since October 2001 after the commencement of Global War on Terror (GWOT); whereas Afghan government was established after the ouster of Afghan Taliban regime in 2002 and the third actor which used to be a state actor and now a violent non-state actor is Afghan Taliban. Ideally, the consensus among the three has to be there for a viable peace in Afghanistan. In reality, this is hard to achieve but not impossible. We can hypothesize these scenarios based on realities and possibilities sans idealism. There are, in fact, possibilities of varied ranges that could bring the stakeholders to some level of consensus and may pave the way for peace and tranquillity in Afghanistan.

### ***Successful intra-Afghan peace deal***

One possible and likely scenario is the beginning of intra-Afghan peace talks. The US government may be an essential peace broker, but eventually, the US will have to leave, and then only the remaining two would have to sit and deliberate about peace. This is one situation that suits Afghan people who are sick and tired of a never-ending war. The possibility of intra-Afghan peace talks, eventually leading to a conclusion could not be ruled out. Even though the Afghan Taliban adhere to ultraorthodox Deobandi sect of Islam and considers the Afghan government as a 'US puppet', they may come to terms to start a dialogue with them. After all the Taliban have made peace with the US, their arch enemy and the one who invaded and removed their regime from Kabul and has been fighting the Taliban since 2001 killing, injuring and arresting thousands of the Taliban foot soldiers and commanders; not to mention killing one of their Emir-ul-Muslimeem, i.e., Mullah Mansoor in a drone strike in 2016 in Pakistan (Al Jazeera, 2016). Albeit this, the Taliban, time and again, held talks and meetings with the Americans and finally made a peace deal with them. Amid this situation, one could project an intra-Afghan peace deal in upcoming years, which would bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. Both sides already seem to be drawn towards dialogue while displaying vanity in their statements and dates of prisoner releases from both sides is in the coming days. There may be delays and contradictory statements from both sides in the initial stage, but this would not stop the process to begin.

### ***De facto division of Afghanistan on communal lines***

In case a dialogue does not result in any positive development for peace in Afghanistan, there is a possibility that Afghanistan may be divided (de facto) in terms of communal lines. Afghan Taliban is primarily a Pashtun movement and Pashtuns form a majority in 11 of 34 provinces of Afghanistan<sup>2</sup>. There are no official figures, but according to estimates, the Pashtun ethnic group constitutes around 42% of total Afghanistan's population, whereas ethnic Tajiks are at 27%, with Hazaras 8% and Uzbeks at 9% (Sawe, 2019). During the last 40 years of warfare, Pashtuns remained at the forefront of fighting with foreigners, local governments and non-state actors. The Pashtuns are considerably weakened and have sustained more losses than other ethnic groups.

Furthermore, millions of Afghan refugees who left the country during the last 40 years of warfare are also Pashtuns, and they have relocated to western countries, Pakistan, Iran and other parts of the world. This movement out of

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<sup>2</sup> Author's assessment is based on the discussions with various scholars and researchers on South Asia

Afghanistan has further shrunk the strength of Pashtuns in Afghanistan. Despite this, the Taliban would likely to create havoc in Pashtun dominated provinces of southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan. If fighting to retake Kabul is not possible for the ragtag Taliban forces and completely decimating the Afghan Taliban is not possible for the Afghan government then there are ways to settle the situation in light of other case studies of weak and fragile states such as Somalia, Mali, Yemen and others. In Somalia, the central government at Mogadishu is unlikely to wrest control of areas falling under the Al-Shabab's control. Hence, the Somali government is managing territories under their control and strengthening their writ rather than launching unsuccessful ground offensives to wipe out Al-Shabab Islamist group, which is a practical way out. The government of Somalia is actually in no position to defeat an estimated 7000-9000 strong Al-Shabab (BBC News, 2017).

Same is the situation in Afghanistan where the Afghan government does not appear to be in a position to defeat the Afghan Taliban. However, it could concede some territories for the sake of peace in a tacit manner. Afghan Taliban may also know this reality that with their guerrilla force of an estimated strength of 60,000 fulltime fighters (Stone, 2019) they could not defeat a weak but still 350,000 strong Afghan National Security Forces and make their way to Kabul. If such a situation arrives at some point of time in near future, then there is a strong possibility that the world community would also accept it for the sake of peace, as this would not be happening first time anywhere in the world. There are several other cases such as The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Colombian government where a tacit understanding has been reached between the state and non-state actors in recent past.

### ***Intra-Afghan prolonged and protracted dialogue without results***

Another possibility for peace is the continuation of peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. This is possible in case the two sides decide to have a ceasefire and then continue holding peace talks for an extended time with specific parameters in mind. This situation is challenging to arrive at but not completely unlikely or unreachable. The Afghan Taliban has a sense of arrogance but as time passes on they may come to realize that defeating a state (though weak and fragile) with a standing army and police and other security apparatus is somewhat very unlikely to happen and this may drain Taliban resources and manpower. They may also have this idea that the US government would bankroll the Afghan government. Amid this situation and realities Pakistan and Iran, the two neighbouring states of Afghanistan are also experiencing severe economic meltdowns, and they would also want Afghan Taliban to reach a settlement with the Afghan government in the near future. Keeping in view of this situation, there is a glimpse of hope that Taliban and Afghan government may come to terms without reaching to conclude a peace deal, but even if that happens, it will allow Afghans a breathing space or at least a temporary peace in the country that may linger on as a permanent feature.

### **Military solution**

Another prospect of peace in Afghanistan after the US-Taliban peace deal is the military solution of the Taliban problem. There is always a military solution with its own costs and ends. Here the military solution does not mean that the US forces defeating Taliban militants but somehow Afghan military developing into a force that would crush the Taliban movement. This seems highly unlikely, but since the peace talks started between Afghan Taliban and the US government the Afghan security forces are engaged in multiple operations against the Taliban militants across the

country, and there clearly appears to be a surge in the military activities of Afghan forces. It is also evident that despite the end of US military operations after the peace deal in February 2020 the Afghan Taliban has not been able to capture any city or urban centre of a rural district not to talk about taking over a province. The Afghan military has ramped up their operations against the Taliban across the country. During the last 19 years, more than 3400 US soldiers and allied soldiers alongside 38,000 Afghan civilians have lost their lives in the conflict (Gramer, 2020). More than 45000 Afghan security forces also killed during the ongoing war (BBC News, 2019). Besides that, more than 42,100 Taliban militants have reportedly been killed, and another 19,000 received injuries (Crawford, 2016).

The Taliban may launch furious attacks in most of the Afghan provinces but their capacities to launch conventional attacks remain limited and keeping in view of modern warfare it would be difficult for them to defeat Afghan forces without conventional prowess. The US-trained Afghan army and air force are somewhat weak, but it is still a potent military force with complete air superiority over the Taliban. If Afghan military forces continue to hold ground and keep deflecting the Taliban guerrilla strikes, it is quite likely that the Taliban would lose momentum, finally come to terms, and start talking to the Afghan government. The current re-election of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his designated vice president Amarullah Salah is indicative of the fact that the Afghan government would not surrender to Afghan Taliban wishes and continue to fight. The presence of hawks like Amarullah Salah and Defense Minister Asadullah Khalid under the wings of President Ghani displays a resolve of the Afghan government to fight to the last in the war against the Taliban. The current Afghan army under Khalid has started to prove its mettle by launching hundreds of military operations against Taliban hideouts and safe havens and inflicting severe damage to their rank and file especially in the last quarter of 2019 and first quarter of 2020. The present states of affairs show that the Afghan government is on an offensive rather than solidifying their defences. With losses being incurred at the current scale, the Afghan Taliban does not seem to have the potential to survive long enough as this time; it would be challenging to mobilize forces against fellow Afghans.

### **Scenarios when peace is unachievable**

There are situations in which it appears that the Afghan peace deal may not last long. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has already said that if the Taliban does not abide by the peace deal, then it would be scrapped. On the other hand, the Afghan government acts as if they were not the party to the peace deal and are not obliged to follow its terms and conditions.

#### ***Taliban-Al-Qaeda nexus continues to grow and rigid ideologies***

One most probable cause of the collapse of the Afghan Taliban-US peace deal would be the continuity of Taliban-Al-Qaeda nexus and their presence in Afghanistan. Hitherto, the Afghan Taliban Shura has not wholeheartedly taken this issue very seriously. The presence of Haqqani Network within Taliban ranks is another major problem that may soon surface. The Haqqani Network is enlisted as Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in the list maintained by the US State Department. The Haqqani-Al-Qaeda closeness is no secret, and Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin Haqqani have remained open supporters and provider of safe havens to Al-Qaeda and other foreign Islamist militants in areas under their control. Neither Taliban nor Haqqanis have condemned Al-Qaeda and terrorist attacks masterminded by Al-Qaeda

Central and other affiliates operating all-over the world. There are reports of Al-Qaeda's South Asia chapter militants (Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent) fighting alongside Afghan Taliban and many Taliban offensives against the Afghan security forces. The Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) Emir Asim Umar was killed in a joint US-Afghan Special Forces strike in Helmand province in October 2019 (Al Jazeera, 2019). There are also other incidents where Al-Qaeda militants were reportedly killed while fighting alongside Afghan Taliban insurgents. The AQIS's official magazine "Nawa-e-Afghan Jihad" acts like an Afghan Taliban mouthpiece. The Taliban has never official distanced Al-Qaeda from them. In fact, Al-Qaeda Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri pledged allegiance to Afghan Taliban's then supreme leader Mullah Omar and later renewed his pledge of allegiance with Mullah Mansoor in 2015 and later after Mansoor's death in 2016, he once again renewed it with Mullah Haibatullah, the new Emir of Afghan Taliban. It would be pertinent to mention here that it was Osama bin Laden who first pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar in 1999, practically making Al-Qaeda part of broader Afghan Taliban movement.

In his op-ed at New York Times in March, Haqqani Network leader Sirajuddin did not mention or said a word regarding condemning Al-Qaeda and Islamist jihadists, even though having known ties with Afghan Taliban. Sirajuddin has also ranked number two in the Afghan Taliban hierarchy, and his father remained the Minister of Border Regions during Taliban ruled Afghanistan (1996-2001). During this whole episode of Islamist insurgency in Afghanistan since the US invasion in October 2001, the Haqqanis remained the most potent force to tackle within eastern Afghanistan. A peace deal without their inclusion would raise many eyebrows as their pivotal role in harbouring foreign Islamist terrorists, fighting against the US and allied forces; and perpetrating hundreds of terrorist attacks in Afghanistan which are of primary importance. From the outset, it appears that Haqqanis would not change their ways and if they continue to harbour Al-Qaeda and other foreign Islamist terrorists who remain operational against Afghan and US forces, then the deal is likely to be off.

### ***Taliban continues to keep fighting the Afghan government, and the US halts withdrawal***

Another possible turn off which is most likely is the US revoking the deal after Taliban refuse ceasefire amid continued attacks. Keeping in view the Trump administration's unpredictable behaviour vis-à-vis Afghanistan (which is at the moment hell-bent on withdrawing troops from Afghanistan) there is an unlikelihood, but things may change if violence does not stop. The Trump administration may not like to lose what the US has invested in Afghanistan over the years since the beginning of GWOT. There is only a slight possibility that the US policy makers would allow Afghanistan to fall back into the hands of the Taliban. This would turn out to be a Vietnam déjà vu which neither the US nor the other free world countries would readily accept. This would be the end of the peace deal.

### ***Afghan government refuses to hold talks***

There are possibilities that hawks in the Afghan government would convince the president and his kitchen cabinet not to hold any talks with Taliban Shura. Amid this scenario, the peace agreement between the US and Taliban would not yield any positive outcomes. The Afghan government may have their own assessments of the situation based upon certain ground facts. Realities such as how to integrate the Afghan Taliban Shura members into an already in placed Afghan political system, the Afghan constitution, rights of women and minorities, and most importantly what role

Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada, the supreme leader of Afghan Taliban, is going to be in the next set up. The Taliban are Islamist fundamentalists, and their rigid ultraorthodox Deobandi ideology may not allow them to give concessions to the current Afghan government and the system. Peace talks between the two sides may be held in order to discuss prisoner release and other issues but developing broader peace framework seems like a bridge too far.

### ***Taliban's apparent victory***

Apart from their rigidity, the Afghan Taliban have this sense of victory and arrogance that they have managed to defeat the US and allies as for them the US signing the peace accord in Doha after much deliberations are the defeat of US. Considering their emotions and understanding of the situation, they may have a feeling of an apparent victory in upcoming years against the Afghan government with the capture of Kabul. Amid this bent of mind, the Taliban may not like to go further in talks with Kabul.

### **Conclusion**

It is apparent with the US-Taliban peace agreement that the US government wants to withdraw and roll back from Afghanistan. This does not mean that the US would allow the Afghan Taliban to take over and defeat the incumbent Afghan government. Having the advantage of superior firepower, the US may resolve the Afghan issue by military means as it could have done the same in Vietnam, but the US government opted to act otherwise. The same is happening again. There is always a military solution with costs attached to it, but the problem is that the US government is not ready to bear those costs. This may come to the advantage of the Afghan Taliban and high time for the Afghan government as it may find at the crossroad in order to survive any further. The fact of the reason is that in the modern era, no military could remain at forefronts in a foreign land for very long. Neither did the Soviets nor the US in Afghanistan or India during the Sri Lankan conflict. Costs of surviving in a foreign environment are high and countering asymmetric warfare even higher. Hence, the Taliban had a fair idea that eventually, the US would withdraw; in fact, it was highly predictable from the start. On the other hand, the US also knew about it, but they just do not want to lose whatever they have gained in Afghanistan during the last 19 years.

The Afghan problem is indeed a cagey difficult one to resolve. The need is to bring all relevant stakeholders on board, whether regional or global. Only the involvement of these stakeholders would help bring peace to Afghanistan. The recent Afghan peace deal was more of a truce between the US and the Taliban and could not be termed as a peace accord in true spirit. This is not in the best interest of the US government to abandon all of their gains in Afghanistan; there is a need to strengthen the Afghan government's resolve to stay put and hold dialogue with Afghan Taliban with dignity. The Taliban needs to be realized that they may be able to get their share reasonably and exceedingly high demands and ambitions may not be allowed to get materialized.

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