

The Afghan Peace Agreement: Repercussions for South Asia

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A historic peace deal was reached between the Afghan Taliban and the U.S. government in the hope of ending the decades-old war in Afghanistan. America's protracted war in Afghanistan is expected to come to an end with the life loss of millions of civilians, thousands of American troops, and billions of dollars. This peace deal is significant in a way that never in history, has a sitting government negotiated with a violent non-state actor, let alone reaching a peace deal with them. This would act as a precedent for such agreements in the future with other non-state actors to restore peace and stability around the globe. However, whether this deal is good enough to sustain peace will be apparent in the future. How the Afghan peace deal will play out in the future is yet to be seen, but the fact that two conflicting parties made it work after years of negotiations is an effort that needs to be acknowledged. The legitimacy of this deal would be derived from the indigenous support from domestic stakeholders and regional powers. The people of Afghanistan have suffered the most in a tug of war between the Taliban and the U.S. government. They deserve a homeland where they can live and work freely without any fear. Thousands of Afghans have been displaced as a result of this war, and this new deal will provide opportunities for the rehabilitation of Afghan refugees. It is high time that Afghanistan closes its woeful war-stricken chapter and embarks upon a road towards development. The Afghan peace deal has the potential to provide stability to an already turbulent South Asian region. With one less threat to deal with, the countries in the region can focus on mitigating other prospective threats to peace and security in South Asia.

Introduction

The United States has signed a deal with the Afghan Taliban to put an end to two decades of war in Afghanistan, which gained momentum after the 9/11 attacks. After more than a year of setbacks to negotiation efforts between the two parties, both sides have finally concluded an agreement which would set the stage for America's withdrawal from Afghanistan (Qazi, 2020). The U.S. government has long been finding ways for a safe exit of their troops as the security situation in Afghanistan continued to exacerbate with the rise of the Taliban. The U.S. has always overlooked the might of Taliban in the country but has now come to terms with the fact that they remain an integral part of Afghanistan's power dynamics. However, the peace agreement does not come without problems. An essential loophole in the deal is the exclusion of the Afghan government who are a major stakeholder in this conflict. Due to the deep-seated grievances between the Taliban and the regime in Kabul, the

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government of Afghanistan was not made part of the negotiations (Samad, 2020). The absence of Afghan government makes the deal unstable as they have a major part to play in the implementation of this agreement. This has eventually allowed the Taliban to gain a concession from the U.S at the expense of the Afghan government, in return for a safe withdrawal of American troops from the country. The deal lacks a mechanism for overseeing its implementation in the future and gives the Taliban the leverage to use this deal as they please.

The prolonged war in Afghanistan has had spillover effects in South Asia and has led to the spread of terrorism across the region. In the peace agreement, the Afghan Taliban have agreed to prevent Al Qaeda, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and other terrorists' organizations from using the Afghan territory for attacks (Walena & Dwyer, 2020). It is hoped that this would suppress terrorists' activities in the region. To what extent the Taliban's enforce this clause will shape the security dynamics in South Asia. Therefore, the application phase of this agreement is crucial in shaping the strategic and security dynamics in the region. It is yet to be seen how this deal plays out for other states in the region and the impact it will have on the rehabilitation of Afghan refugees from neighbouring countries.

Deep Rooted Divisions in Afghanistan

The intra-Afghan dialogue is the most crucial aspect of the Afghan peace deal. This dialogue has the potential to make or break Afghanistan's future in the upcoming time. As the initial negotiations between the U.S government and the Taliban did not include the Afghan government, it is unlikely that the intra-Afghan dialogue will be a success. The Taliban and the Afghan government have not had any direct talks in recent years, which make it difficult for the two parties to negotiate and agree over a solution. The U.S. government has made several decisions without taking into consideration the concerns of the Afghan government. Therefore, the leadership in Kabul is having a hard time accepting the conditions of the deal and implementing them (Willner-Reid, 2020). The Taliban got away with a deal they wanted, giving them an upper hand in the negotiations. Hence, it is going to be a challenging task for the fragile and a divided Afghan government to cooperate with the Taliban during the dialogue process.

There are certain impediments in the execution of the peace plan which can linger the implementation process. First, there are divisions within the leadership in Afghanistan. The government is divided between two potential candidates, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah who are both rooting for the presidency. They have pronounced themselves winners of the September 2019 election and have staged separate swearing-in ceremonies in Kabul. This entrenched rift between the leaders is likely to offset the peace plan before its application begins. This antagonism in the government is delaying the intra-Afghan dialogue, as they are unable to come up with a concrete plan for discourse. This lack of solidarity is likely to be exploited by the Taliban, who are unwilling to start negotiation before their demands as per the peace agreement are met (Jami, 2020).

The differences within the government have started to affect the dialogue process adversely. To begin the intra-Afghan dialogue, it was mutually agreed by the Taliban and the U.S. government that a prisoner swap should take place. As this decision was made without taking the Afghan government into confidence, President Ashraf Ghani was hesitant to comply with it. Even then, Ghani has feebly agreed to release 1500 prisoners in one phase and the remaining 3500 in another phase while citing security concerns and demanding time to study the security situation in the

country. The Taliban have rejected this proposal and demanded the release of all 5000 prisoners before the dialogue process begins with the government (Hirsh, 2020). Such discrepancies between the two sides are bound to influence the peace plan and delay the process negatively. Afghan Taliban views themselves from a position of superiority and are unlikely to cooperate with their government. The U.S. government is hesitant in pressing the Taliban to oblige, and neither do they want themselves to get further involved in the peace process. Hence, the triumph of the peace plan now depends on the relationship between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Implications for South Asia

The region of South Asia has become a hotbed for terrorism since the beginning of the war in Afghanistan. The region has seen import and export of terrorism, especially in the last ten years where the Afghan territory has been used to carry out attacks. The continuous war in Afghanistan had led to the spread of the terrorist networks in neighbouring states, making it difficult to deter this threat (Chakma, 2014). Terrorism remains a crucial source of concern for states in South Asia, particularly for India and Pakistan, who have suffered the most at the hands of these groups. The Afghan Taliban have vowed under this new agreement not to allow their territory to be used for terror attacks by other terrorist organizations. However, it is uncertain how true this will be. However, if the Taliban comply with the peace deal, it will be a first step towards eradicating terrorism from the region.

Nevertheless, terrorism is not the only security concern that overshadows peace in South Asia. Furthermore, there is a lack of friendly bilateral or trilateral relationships between states which have added to the ongoing instability in the region. Issues such as Kashmir and Water dispute between India and Pakistan are also hurdles in regional integration (Lamb, Hameed, & Halterman, 2014). The hostile relations among states has further contributed to the limited regional economic activity and made it difficult for a regional security structure to be set up. The lack of regional connectivity and mistrust in relations will hardly allow the Afghan peace agreement to make a positive impact in the region. Nevertheless, stability in Afghanistan can be the beginning of long-term peace in the region.

To analyze the implications of this peace deal in South Asia, it is essential to look at the relationship between different actors in the region. Firstly, Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban has opened doors for negotiation with the U.S. government, which have resulted in a peace agreement after facing several deadlocks. However, this relationship has also cost Pakistan thousands of lives during its war against terrorism and damaged their relationship with the Afghan government. Besides, it has tarnished the image of Pakistan on international forums, where it is characterized as a terrorist nation or a rouge state (Bohr & Price, 2015). Nevertheless, Pakistan's motives in Afghanistan can be understood by examining the deteriorating security conditions in the country. Thus, Islamabad needed to play a constructive role in the Afghan Peace deal negotiations as stability in the neighbourhood would translate into stability in the country (Mazzetti & Khan, 2020).

Moreover, Pakistan has played a significant role in the negotiations and has facilitated the agreement by continually pushing the two sides to talk. Pakistan can help facilitate the intra-Afghan dialogue as it enjoys a good relationship with the Taliban leaders. Islamabad's relations with the Taliban have proved to be detrimental for this deal whose impact is yet to be seen. While these efforts to bring peace are

hailed as a triumph by Pakistan, it is not viewed in the same manner by India who foresees its influence declining in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the two nuclear neighbours need to set aside their differences and focus on peace in Afghanistan, as it is critical for stability in South Asia.

Secondly, India's friendly relations with Afghanistan have added a new stakeholder to a conflict influenced by Pakistan in the past. New Delhi has employed soft power tactics by investing in infrastructure and development to win the hearts of Afghan. This includes India's investment of around \$2 billion in Afghanistan over the last decade. Through these ventures, India has yearned for stability in the war-torn country as it happens to serve their interests in Kashmir. India firmly believes that the Afghan soil has been used as a launching pad by the Taliban's to train insurgents and infiltrate them into Kashmir (Akhter & Malik, 2009). Through monetary investments in Afghanistan, India hoped to gain influence over the Afghan government to benefit their interests. Therefore, peace in Afghanistan can be a positive sign for India, given its Kashmir policy. However, on the other hand, the Taliban's rise to power can sabotage Indian activities in Afghanistan which will further impair relations between India and Pakistan.

The Afghan peace deal is also expected to have a significant bearing on the Afghan refugees residing in the South Asian states. Pakistan currently hosts more than 1.4 million Afghans, making it the largest country with Afghan refugee. Some of them also reside in Iran and India. In the past four decades, thousands of Afghans have fled their country to find a safe place. They have tried to return home but were either displaced in their own country or became refugees again. The ongoing transition to peace in Afghanistan has become a sign of hope for these refugees who yearn to return home (Greenfield, 2020). Accordingly, if all the states in the region push for this peace deal to remain intact, it can help them overcome the refugee crisis in the future. The Afghan government also needs to take constructive measures to ensure rehabilitation of internally displaced people and refugees across the border.

Conclusion

The Afghan Peace Deal is set to bring an end to United States longest war in history but with various obstacles remaining to be surmounted. The agreement reached between the U.S. government and Taliban leaders lacks an enforcement mechanism giving rise to concerns about the future of this deal. Under this deal, the Taliban have been obligated to insignificant measures, for example, not colluding with terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda which are hard to assess. As America plans to withdraw troops if the Taliban uphold their end of the bargain is a highly doubted question. The U.S. and NATO forces have begun to withdraw their troops which have allowed the Taliban to operate as they like (Sanger et al., 2020). The only thing that interests America is the safe withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan. However, a complete retreat of forces is unlikely to happen if the deal falls apart during the intra-Afghan dialogue process. Therefore, America needs to realize that without stability in Afghanistan, it would be improbable to retreat without chaos. There is also growing skepticism among western scholars who believe that the Taliban would not honor this agreement. As president of The Brookings Institute John Allen said:

The Taliban are untrustworthy; their doctrine is irreconcilable with modernity and the rights of women; and in practice, they're incapable of summoning the necessary

internal controls and organizational discipline needed to implement a far-flung agreement like this. The so-called “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” will not only not be honored by the Taliban, but it will also not bring peace (Allen, 2020).

These views are substantiated from the fact that the Taliban have continued to carry out attacks on Afghan forces even after the peace agreement was signed. However, a ceasefire was not agreed upon. Nonetheless, on a bright side, the deal could remain intact if all stakeholders play their part, including the U.S. and Pakistan’s government. At present, there are heated tensions between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrived in Kabul on March 23, 2020 to resuscitate the waning peace deal. Pompeo is expected to help bring an end to the impasse, which has stalled progress on the deal (Faiez & Ganno, 2020). While America pushes the Afghan government, Pakistan can play its part by speaking with the Taliban and persuading them to negotiate with the Afghan government. The intra-Afghan peace talks are a crucial next step in the deal to ensure Afghanistan’s transition to peace.

The smooth functioning of this deal is necessary for peace and stability in South Asia. If this deal blows over, there will be unforeseen repercussions for all the states in the region. It could lead to another refugee crisis resultantly disturbing the security balance in South Asia. The failure of this deal would provide the Taliban with the opportunity to join forces with Al-Qaeda and ISIS and expand its network in the region. Such a scenario would result in a debacle, and South Asia would again be eclipsed by terrorism. Therefore, the regional powers need to step up their efforts to ensure the deal remains intact. Similarly, the U.S. government needs to restructure its strategies to deal with this ongoing conflict if they want a safe exit from Afghanistan.

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