

Securitization of the Troubled Afghan Peace Process and the Role of Pakistan

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Abstract

Following the 9/11 attacks, the national security policies — notably of the Western nations — have taken a fundamental shift towards viewing vulnerable and unstable states, such as Afghanistan, as security threats. The strategic interference of the United States and its allies, for state-building in Afghanistan, not only failed in achieving its intended outcomes but also brought untold suffering and severe repercussions to the Afghan people. The major powers involved in the post-9/11 war against terror in Afghanistan — particularly the United States — had to bear heavy costs in terms of capital, materials, and lives. Being a neighbor of Afghanistan and a responsible state committed to peace in the region, Pakistan has made genuine and consistent efforts to promote a peace process that is Afghan-owned and Afghan-led, in order to bring sustainable peace and stability to Afghanistan. Using the post 9/11 U.S. mission as an example, this article analyzes how the securitization of development has affected the peace process in Afghanistan. The securitization theory of the Copenhagen School is used as a basis to explain the dynamics of the peace process (led by the United States) with the Taliban.

Keywords

Afghanistan, Pakistan, peace process, securitization, Taliban

Introduction

Afghanistan has a history of being subjected to multiple political struggles and ideological movements, including those that turned violent. Limiting the scope of the discussion to the last half-century, it is evident that the Cold War, the emergence of Taliban, and the 2001 U.S. invasion in Afghanistan are of considerable importance that have very much transformed and shaped the environment of the country in the contemporary times. In response to the twin tower attacks on September 11, 2001, the U.S. and allied forces invaded Afghanistan, dismantling the Al-Qaeda terrorist network and overthrowing the Taliban government that had protected the (Al-Qaeda) terrorists (Malkasian, 2020).

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Afghanistan was a poor and deeply divided nation at the time of the U.S. invasion, emerging from decades of war (Barnett & Zurcher, 2009), and the majority of the population of the country faced food insecurity and hunger (Rashid, 2001). The situation of food (in)security has not yet improved, and a large number of Afghans are still subjected to food insecurity and hunger (USAID, 2020). Poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation, lack of access to health care services, and environmental degradation all compounded the impact of the Afghan war as well as the U.S. invasion on the health of the general population (Janzekovic, 2009). In addition, the country was already experiencing a massive outward displacement because of the war and the Taliban rule, and the U.S. invasion further aggravated the refugee crisis, resulting in the Afghan refugee population being one of the largest (protracted) in the history of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). In 2021, the number of refugees belonging to Afghanistan has been recorded around 2.5 million, which makes Afghanistan the country contributing the largest number of refugees after Syria (UNHCR Reporting, 2021). Though the U.S. military officers maintained that the Taliban were 'resilient' to the Afghan troops and that the troops from the outside could effectively counter the Taliban (Baldor & Pennington, 2018), the militants have managed to effectively control larger territories within Afghanistan than what they had previously occupied in 2001 (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2019). Several different armed groups are playing an active role in this struggle, including members of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS, also known as ISIL and Da'esh; Thomas, 2020b).

'Locating' Peace Process in Afghanistan

In the last quarter of 2001, when the Taliban regime was toppled in Afghanistan, a more comprehensive discussion was triggered over the promotion of a government that would enter the fight against terrorism and lay the foundations for sustainable peace in the country. For the purpose, various leaders from different Afghan groups met under the auspices of the United Nations in Bonn, Germany, in December 2001 — months after the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Formalized on December 05, 2001, the Bonn Agreement was a legal and political structure that allowed the allied forces to begin with the post-war reconstruction efforts in a war-torn nation (Suhrke, Harpviken & Strand, 2002).

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctioned the deployment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), in Kabul and surrounding areas, against the Taliban and al-Qaeda forces. ISAF was deployed as a NATO peacekeeping and reconstruction force under the 2001 Bonn agreement. It was based on the 'coalition of the willing' model, and its advantageousness was that it could be easily deployed since it was not created by the United Nations; instead, it consisted of national contingents working under a UNSC resolution (Suhrke et al., 2002). Thus, in contrast to the U.N. peacekeeping mission, the ISAF worked with a rather limited institutionalization and with a more unpredictable timetable than was the norm for the U.N. peacekeeping operations. The Bonn Agreement was a preliminary step towards peace-building in Afghanistan after the fighting. It not only made recommendations on power-sharing in the political and military spheres but also came up with the principles for improving the social and economic sectors to ensure the transition to

peace building (Suhrke et al., 2002). Barnett and Zurcher (2009) are of the view that the international community offered support for the diplomatic process and provided “muscular and generous” funding because of its perceived relevance to the new security agenda and the War on Terrorism (p. 43).

Building a new Afghan nation by fostering reconstruction, change, and growth was the aim set by the international community (Banerjee, 2008, p. 25). The world pledged the approximately U.S. \$286.4 billion for the purpose of stabilizing Afghanistan and building its governmental capabilities; subsequently rendering the country to be a significant beneficiary of a high concentration of foreign assistance (Poole, 2011). Even in 2000 (the year before the U.S. invasion), Afghanistan was the 69th largest recipient of Official Development Assistance (ODA) worldwide, receiving 0.3 per cent of the total ODA. And by 2008, it had become the world’s leading aid recipient, with the total share of ODA increasing from US\$ 1.3 billion in 2009 to US\$ 6.2 billion in the same year (Poole, 2011).

Furthermore, since 2002, the United States has spent more than \$132 billion in Afghanistan on many reconstruction programs in the form of assistance to improve the capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2014). Some U.S. policymakers further expect that the geo-political significance, underdeveloped natural sources, and strategic location of Afghanistan at the crossroads of possible global trade routes would increase the economic power of the United States in the region in addition to contributing to the social and political (regional) complexities, even though the financial and political incentives for Afghanistan remain uncertain (Poole, 2011).

The Afghan Taliban leaders have failed to convince the U.S. military officials that the former is ready to become the latter’s ‘reliable allies’ (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020) and help usher in a new era of stability in Afghanistan. On June 10, 2020, a new warning was issued by the U.S. Primary Central Commander (CENTCOM) to the US forces, led by Kenneth McKenzie, adding that the forces are likely to remain in Afghanistan unless significant adjustments are made (Seldin, 2020). However, after getting charge of office, President Biden announced to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan until September 11, 2021. And the U.S. troops and their NATO allies intend to be out of Afghanistan well ahead of the withdrawal deadline given by the President (Neff, Schmitt & Cooper, 2021)

With the first section of the article introducing the context of the study for which this article will address the question of whether the securitization process in a post-conflict Afghanistan affects the peace process, the following part of the article discusses the securitization theory in brief. The theory of securitization, proposed by the Copenhagen School, contends that threats are socially constructed rather than being objective in nature. The states are labelled as fragile (or) failed states and it is understood that this fragility is what lets these states to be used for spreading terrorism, and so, this helps to securitize the public rhetoric about the risks faced by the international community. The succeeding section then looks at the potential challenges that the peace process in Afghanistan may face. And lastly, a general discussion over the potential effect(s) of securitization on the peace process is presented.

Theoretical Framework

This social constructivist method of conceptualizing security — i.e., ‘securitization’ — was first proposed by the Copenhagen School of Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde (Stritzel, 2014). The main argument of the securitization theory is that the political agents securitize issues and present them as *threats* to legitimize their goals. The theory’s primary aim is to clarify *who*, *why*, and under *what* conditions the political actors securitize any problem. It is to note here that the theory of securitization, instead of associating primary importance with the military and security aspects, views securitization as a political result or outcome. Therefore, it is argued that ‘security’ is an outcome of some social process(es) instead of being embedded in any objective reality (Popovic, 2007). The securitization theory argues the same; security is socially and inter-subjectively constructed.

Hayes (2013) has identified three elements of a successful securitization process; existential threat, referents object, and means for resolving the threat. According to the Copenhagen School, an issue becomes a security issue (i.e., securitized) after a securitizing actor introduces it as an existential threat, and the audience embraces this ‘securitizing move’ (Kaunert & Leonard, 2010, p.57). When some issue begins to be viewed as an existential threat, it not only calls for emergency measures but also justifies acts that are beyond the usual limits of any democratic procedure (Ezeokafor, 2015).

Kaunert and Leonard (2011) have asserted that it is important to identify the audience — for whom the securitization is being framed — to make the process effective. In their words, “it is necessary for the system to provide a simple conceptualization of who constitutes the audience and how its acceptance is” (2010, p. 73). They further argue that the mechanism of securitization would remain uncertain if the actual existence of an audience could not be decided, as an issue becomes a security issue only when it is viewed as a *threat* by the audience. Therefore, the Copenhagen School describes ‘securitization’ as an inter-subjective mechanism that can be institutionalized, such as in military matters (Soltani, Naji, & Amiri, 2014).

The securitization theory presents an ideal framework for this article while also accommodating the actors and reference objects other than the state. Apart from the state-centric and conventional military-focused approach to understanding security, it enabled us to examine security from a different viewpoint. Furthermore, such conceptualization explicates the position of the modern security referents that includes societies, non-state actors, and individuals by expanding the scope of security.

Fragile or Failed States?

It is argued that terrorists are trained in Afghanistan and Somalia while transnational crime networks are forming themselves in Myanmar, Burma, and Central Asia. In addition, poverty, disease, and humanitarian crises are wreaking havoc on the governments of Haiti and the Central African region. These diverse crises, which form the fundamental foreign policy and security challenges of the time, relate to a common thread. These crises stem from, spread to, and disproportionately affect the developing countries, where the governments not only lack the capacity to respond

but often also lack the will to respond. These states are argued to have been (almost) completely collapsed in the most drastic instances, as in Afghanistan, Haiti, or Somalia. In many others, these (fragile) states, despite being unable to meet the international standards, are considered to have not yet failed. However, it is recognized that in most cases, the governments of the developing countries are unable to provide the services that their people and the international community require from them, such as protecting citizens from internal and external threats, providing essential health and education services, and developing institutions that respond to the legitimate demands and needs of the population. From the human security perspective, these poor and 'failed' states have implications for the world in general and the United States in particular, as far as its security, values, and the global economic growth opportunities on which the American economy is based are concerned. The same is why the 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy listed the 'vulnerable' and 'failing' states as a high priority danger (Baker, 2009).

A similar discourse surrounds Afghanistan for which the words such as the 'fragile state', 'failed state', and 'failing state' are used to justify the deployment of (international) troops and the continuing involvement in the (security) affairs of the country. Stephen Brown (2016) has argued that the use of 'failed and unstable state' language reflects the nature or imminence of instability that calls for some military action to avert or overcome a crisis. He also indicates that the phrase 'failed or unstable states' is purposely used to explain a relatively ad hoc decision to intervene in particular 'crisis countries' where the government might practically use development assistance to contribute to peace and security.

Afghanistan is one of the most prominent examples quoted to classify the 'failing states' and the protective havens for terrorists. There is irrefutable proof to the argument that the country acted as the headquarters of al-Qaeda prior to the 9/11 incident (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). The 9/11 attacks planned and carried out by the terrorists facilitated by the ones based in Afghanistan led to the concern (of big powers, particularly the United States) pertaining to the threat of terrorism. The securitization process was completed when the public (audience) approved the securitization of this particular issue that called for the U.S. led coalition to continue its mission to resolve the existential security threat created by a fragile country (in this case —Afghanistan).

Challenges to the Afghan Peace Process

The United States, since 2018, has been aiming towards a fully diplomatic strategy to end the conflict, especially through direct talks with the Taliban leaders (which is a reversal of the U.S. strategy with the Taliban to date). In January 2019, the U.S. negotiators and the Taliban drafted an agreement to preclude the Taliban from carrying out military operations, on the territory of Afghanistan, against the coalition forces led by the United States. However, this agreement could not establish a complete and clear consensus between the Afghan government, its politicians, soldiers, and prominent opinion leaders. Although the talks were promised to be comprehensive and inclusive, it is argued that President Ghani had, for a long time, acted on his own without taking others on board. In addition, no preliminary assessment was conducted to gauge the opinions, beliefs, and trust of the people

regarding the peace talks (Seren, 2021). There is also a need to expand the scope of 'national reconciliation' in order to prevent the Taliban from being represented as the sole stakeholders of the Afghan society (Sheikh & Greenwood, 2013).

The securitization process — with an intensified emphasis on vulnerable states as the root of the existential threat — has been used to justify a vigorous response for achieving international peace and security. Owing to this reason, multiple actors from different fields, including the military, civilian, and humanitarian organizations, have played an important role in the post-conflict peacebuilding in Afghanistan. A significant amount of foreign funding was made (readily) available for reconstruction and development in the country (as discussed earlier). However, the presence of foreign actors in the war zone had unforeseen consequences. While all the players shared the same goal of bringing stability and restoring peace to Afghanistan, they all had their own values, desires, and mandates which did not always coincide with the local needs or priorities. Therefore, the peace-building process has been facing a variety of difficulties in the country; for instance, lack of trust, political crisis, and increasing violence.

Peacebuilding in Afghanistan has been securitized under the national and international security agendas of the influential states that remain stationed in the country (Paris, 2018). It also restricts the peace-building process to the security agenda of the donor countries rather than the development agenda of the affected country. It is argued that the development agenda of Afghanistan, like many other fragile countries, should concentrate on human security, giving locals a sense of agency and enabling them to make their own decisions, restoring infrastructure and education, and improving institutional capacity and political legitimacy — all of which leave them vulnerable to political instability and violent conflict. Naomi Weinberger (2002) has argued that three dimensions need to be essentially considered to ensure success in peacebuilding: the local origins of hostility, local capacity building, and the degree of international engagement.

In the context of the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan, this article argues that the U.S. securitization policies had some unfavorable consequences for peacebuilding in Afghanistan. The imbalances in the budget, unwillingness to create a local agency, the ineffectiveness of assistance, and failure to incorporate efficient capacity building served as the primary contributing factors in this regard. On the other hand, the Taliban — with respect to their military status — seems to be in quite a strong position, although they (arguably) lack the ability to sustain the victories that allowed them to rejoice in the near-monopoly of resources like that in the 1990s. The complexities of the Afghan home politics and the ongoing global support for ANSF and Afghanistan has played a significant role in this matter (Weinberger, 2002). Nevertheless, Dobbins and colleagues (2019) have argued that after the U.S. invasion, there has been little hope left of realizing and maintaining a non-violent and strong Afghanistan, as the regional policies and interests have had their very own wishes for the Afghans with little promising outcomes.

The efforts to bring the Taliban to peace talks, in 2001-02, were strategically indefensible in the first years of the Afghan war; primarily due to the 'popular' linkages between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The Taliban were also withdrawn from the Bonn Convention of

2001 and the Afghan Transitional Authority on the Defense of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in the same year, both of which were supported by the United Nations Security Council (Bew et al., 2019). From 2006 onwards, the rise and longevity of the Taliban insurgency drastically changed the approach towards the peace talks. The strength of the insurgency multiplied during this time, leading to the concerns being voiced regarding engaging with those who have been excluded from the peace talks as it was considered the most effective way to restore some kind of stability in Afghanistan (Bew et al., 2019). As a result, the concept of ‘talking to the Taliban’ has undergone multiple developmental stages — from the unimaginable to the edge of realistic political acceptance — until it became a legitimate discourse embraced at the level of the government. For some, this change was arbitrary and risky, but it became an assessment of the military fate of the West as part of a coherent strategy (Bew et al., 2019).

Around 2019, confidence-building measures had already gained momentum in talking to the Taliban, especially because ISAF forces had achieved a definite battlefield victory as their departure date from the battlefield had been set. Optimistic trends, including the relative weakening of the Taliban or a greater willingness on their part to trade in barter, had been highlighted by the dialogue advocates. Though the latter proved itself to be elusive and difficult to be peacefully used, it was a sign of moderation for the Taliban (Bew et al., 2019). Much of the direct talks of the U.S. government with the Taliban, which began in Qatar in July 2018, had generated some hope regarding conflict resolution through diplomatic means. By 2019, the two parties had already found a common ground — based on ‘preliminary resolution’ — as early as six rounds. This included a reduction and eventual withdrawal of the U.S. forces and the commitment of the Taliban not to allow foreign terrorist organizations to rule in Afghanistan (Suhrke & Lauri, 2019). It was anticipated that the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan would be influenced owing to the U.S. presidential elections of 2020. The former President Donald Trump had kept no secret of his desire to withdraw from the Afghan war, particularly when the United States was hardly expecting a victory (Suhrke & Lauri, 2019).

The talks between the United States and the Taliban raised (some) concerns for Kabul regarding the prospects of the United States signing a separate agreement with the Taliban, withdrawing its final fourteen thousand troops, and leaving the country (Suhrke & Lauri, 2019). In accordance with the Doha Agreement, the United States was to reduce its troops to approximately 8,600 and complete the withdrawal in May 2021. Different gestures exhibiting goodwill on the part of the Taliban and the Afghan government followed these peace talks. The Taliban, in May 2020, announced a three-day truce in honor of *Eid-ul-Fitr*. Afghan President Ghani lauded the trend and released 2,000 Taliban prisoners as a ‘goodwill gesture’ (DW News, 2020).

It was expected that an agreement between the United States and the Taliban could put an end to the U.S. military interference in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it was anticipated that the Taliban might start intra-Afghan talks in March 2020, but no such actions could be scheduled until the proposed date (Thomas, 2020a). The U.S. diplomat Mary Catherine Phee, on February 18, 2020, said,

We are not now evaluating the outcome of the intra-Afghan talks with the understanding that we would be biased to support any solution that can be made of their abilities and governance preparation by the Afghans. Kabul and the Taliban, meanwhile, are unsure to what extent they are willing to give up their armed struggle in return for a political settlement (TOLO News, 2020, nd.).

The Afghan President Ghani vowed that his authorities would no longer receive an agreement restricting the rights of the Afghans and declared that any agreement regarding the U.S. withdrawal that would not take on board the Afghan government would lead directly to the ‘catastrophic’ events. The Afghan government believes that without the U.S. military pressure, the Taliban will have little incentive to obey the terms of the agreement; this can eventually create more challenges in achieving a substantive political agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban (Thomas, 2020a). The Taliban have issued conflicting statements and have seldom described their innovative and prospective resettlement in Afghanistan as a matter of intra-Afghan negotiations. President Ghani was also able to resolve disagreements with his political opponent, Abdullah Abdullah², who claimed to have won the 2019 presidential elections and announced to lead his government alongside Ghani (DW News, 2020).

A survey conducted in December 2019 found that a vast majority of Afghans (89 per cent) strongly or significantly support the attempts to negotiate an agreement with the Taliban. The Afghan government did convene a 21-membered negotiating team, including five women, following the peace negotiations between the United States and the Taliban, in March 2020. However, the Taliban denounced the team and refused to enter into talks with Kabul (Thomas, 2020a). This shows that the Taliban peace process always fell victim to a diplomatic stalemate owing to the interests of the parties involved and the ever-present violence in the region. The issue of U.S. withdrawal was also concluded after lengthy negotiations and deliberations. It kept getting stalled in 2020 because the U.S. was concerned with the Taliban’s failure to reduce violence and distancing themselves from Al-Qaeda. However, the talks of withdrawal resumed in 2021 with determination. The U.S. Central Command stated that more than 30 per cent of American troops have already been withdrawn from Afghanistan until May 2020 (Press Trust of India, 2021).

In all these circumstances, the regional stakeholders can anticipate a more significant role in shaping the course of the Afghan peace process, particularly following the U.S. withdrawal. Pakistan, given its close geographical proximity to Afghanistan and the growing strength of terrorist groups already operating in the region, could arguably be one of the states most affected if the intra-Afghan talks fail (Pandey, 2020). Therefore, Pakistan has been trying to play its part in the Afghan peace process to ensure regional peace and stability.

² *Abdullah Abdullah* also serves as the Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), leading the intra-Afghan peace talks.

Regional Dynamics and the Role of Pakistan

Regional dynamics and the involvement of foreign powers are significant factors in the context of Afghanistan. Pakistan, in particular, has been greatly impacted by the protracted conflict in Afghanistan. It is equally important to mention that Pakistan has been facing the brunt of terrorism primarily owing to the spillover effects of the conflict and instability in Afghanistan. Therefore, instability in Afghanistan has the potential to re-establish the disadvantage of Pakistan, while Pakistan is the country already trying to manage its security issues majorly in the erstwhile tribal agencies that border Afghanistan (White House, 2017). Alongside managing its internal problems, Pakistan has played a significant role in the recent peace talks. A report by the Defense Department of Afghanistan has stated that “Pakistan helps reconcile Afghans,” describing Pakistan’s status as “optimistic but contained” (Congressional Research Service, 2020, p. 10).

Pakistan has continued to face destabilization due to the complexities in its own (former) tribal regions. These complexities majorly owed their existence to the sanctuaries of different terrorist organizations, including the Pakistani as well as the Afghan Taliban, mainly in the areas of North and South Waziristan (Coll, 2018; Makki & Yamin, 2021). Despite the U.S. skepticism, Pakistani authorities remain committed to regional peace efforts, and Pakistan was quite hopeful in relation to the talks with Afghans to establish a “plan of action for peace and solidarity”. Prime Minister Imran Khan had promised that Pakistan would make a significant contribution to the peace process, local and regional security, the issue of refugees, controlling illicit cross-border trading, and the war against terrorism. However, the intentions of Pakistan for pursuing these goals and its ability to deter insurgent groups on both sides of the border are subject to questioning (Coll, 2018). While both the Afghan Taliban and Tehrek-e-Taliban Pakistan are ‘independent’ movements with distinct political and religious motivations, the latter comprises different assemblages from various internal geographies. This helps to focus on the multiple complexities of the peace talks and on the difficulties of Pakistan in balancing the new *threat* posed by the Tehrek-e-Taliban Pakistan and their relationship with the Afghan Taliban. Understanding the complexities of the situation remains crucial; it will also have a significant effect on the stability of Afghanistan considering the U.S. ties with the Afghan Taliban (Sheikh & Greenwood, 2013).

Discussion and Conclusion

The case of Afghanistan arguably illustrates the struggles that came with the deployment of US forces on Afghanistan soil. Their authorizations on the ground give different viewpoints on such struggles. The militarization of peace and development, combined with a greater emphasis on vulnerable states as a source of existential threat, has justified a strong response to achieve international peace and stability. Owing to this securitization, diverse actors have been involved in the post-conflict peacebuilding, while also attracting a significant amount of foreign funding for the purpose. However, in Afghanistan — having been mired in (counter-) insurgency —, decades of violence and deep ethnic divisions, no peace-building project has been as daunting as this. The post-9/11 peacebuilding mission in Afghanistan began with the Bonn Agreement of 2001, in which the international community promised support for

restoring the strength of the Afghan state (Mehran, 2020). In this international peace-building project, the position of the U.S.-led coalition mission demonstrates that adding a degree of priority and urgency to issues where failure to respond quickly is presented as a substantive security challenge generates a different but equally harmful risk of jeopardizing popular values and freedom.

Furthermore, in a post-conflict situation, prioritizing security over the stability and reconstruction mission results in the peace-building goals being reduced to a by-product of security rather than the ultimate target (Tschirgi, 2003). To achieve the long-term security objectives of Afghanistan, the U.S. securitization policies focused on the stability of the peace process and development. These policies influenced the peace-building goals, programs, and objectives as well as their outcomes. The consequence of securitizing these policies was that the overall strategy of the Afghan government struggled to exhibit a cohesive and coherent approach, and the rivalry between all 3Ds (Defense, Development, and Diplomacy) for policy ownership, access to resources, and implementation of the program has increased. As a result, *security* was prioritized over *development*.

Furthermore, the 'failed and fragile state' language stressed the imminence of instability that demanded military action to assist a fragile country such as Afghanistan. Effective peacebuilding requires a deep understanding of the value of development and a determination to invest in the necessary tools and resources to resolve development challenges; before they become immediate threats to security (Tschirgi, 2003). In comparison, the Western securitization of the development agendas has shown that providing security and development to communities in need with a simplistic 'win the local hearts and minds' strategy (to achieve quick results) is not conducive to long-term stability. Instead, lasting peace can only be accomplished if the peacebuilders adopt an inclusive and contextually-driven approach. Furthermore, the peacebuilders need to recognize the contextual realities by empowering the locals and giving them *agency* in the development process, rather than implementing their own agendas (Tschirgi, 2003; USIP, 2021). Furthermore, the provision of assistance in combination with the military presence in a recipient state decreases the credibility of the overall peace-building mission.

The current situation in Afghanistan shows that, while the political landscape has shifted, the effect of the securitized growth on peacebuilding remains precarious. The Taliban, who were the main insurgents, have now re-emerged *legit* players. The signing of an agreement between the U.S. officials and the Taliban leaders in Doha, Qatar, in February 2020, marked an end to the U.S.-led War on Terror; it set a timeline for the complete withdrawal of American troops, called for an end to hostilities by forcing the Taliban to sever relations with terrorist groups (such as Al-Qaeda), and encouraged unity through intra-Afghan peace dialogue (Mehran, 2020). Given the political turmoil in Kabul, there are concerns regarding the relapse of Afghanistan into (civil)war; hence, jeopardizing the overall performance of the mission.

In Afghanistan, legitimacy is often established or weakened in relation to engaging with locals on the ground. Considering this very factor, the Afghan people significantly lost confidence in the efficacy and legitimacy of the Afghan government and began to search for alternative authorities. The Taliban, effectively responding to

such circumstances, crafted their securitizing moves considering the diverse local audiences, skillfully drawing upon the resources available to create resonance with their values and expectations. Rather than trying to win hearts and minds, the focus of the Taliban has mainly been on control and submission.

Despite intense efforts by the international community, Afghanistan is still struggling to achieve sustainable peace and stability. The security situation in the country is still turbulent and is reportedly worsening in the post-U.S. withdrawal. In all these circumstances, it is important to evaluate the performance of the mission in Afghanistan and its accomplishments before it is considered as a blueprint for new ways to respond to the complexities of vulnerable and unstable states.

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