

THE PROSPECT OF PEACE TALKS WITH THE TALIBAN

This paper analyses the peace talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. Identifying several factors including a lack of an inclusive and clear structure the paper discusses reasons why these peace talks lack legitimacy with the Afghan public and fail to effectively engage the Taliban. The author, Hasrat Hussain, a peace practitioner from Afghanistan, identifies measures that would strengthen the process and give Afghan peace talks a greater chance of success.

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*The future of peace-
negotiations in
Afghanistan*

I. Summary

Afghan peace talks began rapidly after the collapse of the Taliban regime in December 2001 and lack a comprehensive and inclusive design as well as a clear structure. The peace talks aim only to invite the Taliban to join a new democratic Afghanistan and lack legitimacy with parts of the Afghan population as they appear to have an exclusively Pashtun focus. The elite-oriented peace talks do not guarantee human rights values and affect the presence, support and trust of the Afghan population and civil society in the process. Offers from the peace talks have been made from a weak position and have not yet convinced the Taliban to negotiate with the Afghan Government. It is highly likely that the current peace talks will undermine both the credibility of American involvement and the legitimacy of the Afghan Government. Successful peace talks in Afghanistan will require the Afghan Government to create a comprehensive strategy to deal with the Taliban as well as take into account the influential role that external actors, both international and regional, can have in the peace process. In addition, successful peace talks and the transition process in general require the United States and its NATO allies to revise their exit strategy to ensure they do not leave Afghanistan with a potentially bloody civil war.

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II. Introduction

Every warring army needs to know its enemy; the same is true for running a successful negotiation process, which in turn necessitates a deep knowledge of the conflict parties, their modus operandi, and their aim and intentions (Giustozzi, 2010). Having an accurate picture of the Taliban helps the government of Afghanistan and other stakeholders to invest more in current peace negotiation efforts, which have not produced any results in the past 6-7 years. The Taliban are better understood by their ethno-religious characteristics, their political agenda and proxy wars fought with the central government during recent years and by their international allies.

The events of September 11, 2001 were indirectly attributed to the Taliban due to their provision of safe sanctuary to al-Qaeda's leaders and training camps for its fighters. The United States military intervention in Afghanistan was unleashed when the Taliban refused to hand over Osama Bin Laden to the United States for trial. The intervention resulted in a quick collapse of the Taliban and a commitment by NATO allies to the global war against terrorism, and Afghanistan's reconstruction.

Although there was no clear or concrete framework for structuring and conditioning the negotiations, the talks and peace negotiations began rapidly after the Taliban regime was dismantled in December 2001. At that time, the objective of such initiatives was merely an invitation for the Taliban to join the new, broad-based and democratic Afghanistan. The peace talk endeavours led by the Afghan Government and the international community did not achieve notable success. The predominant approach was clearly ad hoc, resulting in more and increasing ambiguity within and outside of Afghanistan (Sharma, 2012). Thereafter, the government and the international community intensified their efforts to convince the Taliban to follow their interests through peaceful means rather than violence. Though the first phase of the international community's involvement was basically military-oriented, they gradually changed their attitudes towards the Afghan conflict. Now, most of the international community recognizes that the war in Afghanistan will have a political rather than a military solution (Brahimi & Pickering, 2001).

Peace itself, or the impossibility of peace, is not greatly discussed within or outside of Afghanistan. What is discussed are the processes and structures of peace-seeking. Peace talks, which seem to be part of the grand conflict transformation project, do not consider the root causes, rapidly changing reasons and escalating dynamics of conflict. This ambiguity at both policy and practical levels has affected the expected quality of the peace talks.

a) **The Background of Peace and Conflict in Afghanistan**

A rapid glimpse at Afghanistan's conflict indicates that the Taliban period is only a short chapter of the conflicted history of the country. Admittedly, the appearance of the Taliban phenomenon in Afghanistan's political scene is the consequence of repeated failure to build a broad-based and democratic state. Peaceful transition of power has rarely been seen in Afghanistan since its establishment as a Pashtun-dominated buffer state in the *great game* era between British India and tsarist Russia. Although most Afghan scholars consider the origin of the Taliban and Talibanism within this context (Crews & Tarzi, 2009), there is no common interpretation of this controversial past. This may be the result of dominance by one ethnic group in power and politics, which restricted the work of researchers and historians for nearly the past three centuries. Recently, historians and peace scholars have started to explore geologically the root causes of conflict in Afghanistan and its historically controversial past.

A recent phase of the Afghan conflict began with the 1978 coup d'état led by Nur Mohammad Taraki, in which President Daud and his family were executed. The newly established communist regime employed suppression and draconian violence to subjugate people and force them to abide by the installed regime's policy and law (Oxfam, ACSF, & SDO, 2009). Increasing arrests, torture and mass executions of people and an offensive policy to implement social reforms compelled most Afghans to rise up and react against the newly installed regime. While the resistance intensified, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to defend its puppet regime in Kabul. Islamic factions with the support of many people who would later become known as Mujahedeen waged a guerrilla war in many rural parts of Afghanistan (Oxfam, ACSF, & SDO, 2009).

The conflict escalated even more as the Soviet Union got directly involved. The Soviet Union's military intervention connoted cold war competition between the two known blocs; West against East on Afghanistan's ground. The Soviet Union failed to sustain its installed regime in Kabul and eventually collapsed. Its legacy, however, had a far greater reach in Afghanistan. The internal effects of the Soviet Union's intervention were more dramatic than expected. The socio-political effects of the Soviet presence, its support to the Kabul regime and its ambitious social reform agenda are hard to estimate. Visible consequences, however, were the weakening of ethnocentric power structures and traditionalism. The new changes in socio-political fields happened in the 1980s and 1990s between different ethnic groups and make up the ethnic dimension of the Afghan conflict. The Soviet Union's failure is attributed to the Mujahedeen efforts, but the broader context of the cold war era in which the United States and its Middle Eastern allies generously supported the Mujahedeen with tactical and logistical support and sent radical youths to fight against the Soviet Union cannot be ignored. The emergence of Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan are the most obvious examples of such support. The role of Afghanistan's neighbours, particularly Iran and Pakistan, was vital in the 1980s and 1990s and still is.

After the Mujahedeen's defeat, the Taliban feigned to build a state and to manage a ravaged country. Instead, Afghanistan descended into a new phase of chaos and conflict led by the Taliban who had first been conceived as a messenger of peace and freedom. By providing safe sanctuary and training camps, the Taliban was counted as the closest ally of Al-Qaeda. After September 11, 2001, the Taliban refused to hand over Osama Bin Laden to the United States for trial. This was perceived as confirmation of the fact that the Taliban had been the indirect accessory to Al-Qaeda before the events of September 11, 2001. Thereafter, the United States and the United Kingdom decided to overthrow the Taliban regime, destroy Al-Qaeda, and bring Osama Bin Laden to justice (Clements, 2003). The United States initiated its air campaign on October 7, 2001 against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda whom they deemed responsible for the September 11 attacks. After only 62 days of fighting, the Taliban regime collapsed, and the United States declared victory in Afghanistan (Forests, 2007, pp. 454-455). Although the United States triumphed so quickly, they have since been constrained by insurgency, escalating

violence and deteriorating conflict in Afghanistan for more than a decade. In the following sections I am going to focus on the weaknesses, strengths, challenges and the prospects of peace, security and stability in Afghanistan's future.

b) **Objective of the Paper**

The main objective of this paper is to outline the state, structure, content and weaknesses of the current peace negotiations with the Taliban. Peace talks have been on-going since 2001 but there seems to be no willingness from the Taliban to talk with the Afghan Government. The ideological and political beliefs held by the Taliban are significant motivation for the Taliban to keep fighting against the Afghan Government and its international allies. In addition to explaining the state of peace negotiations, this paper also focuses on the Afghan Government's ability to correct and strengthen its position by gaining internal grassroots and women's support for peace and a political settlement. Briefly the paper takes up the following issues:

- Explaining the state of peace negotiations with the Taliban;
- Disclosing the weaknesses and shortfalls of the peace design;
- Using historical experiences in order to create a more effective peace process;
- Raising the voices and concerns of the marginalized social and ethnic groups to be included in plans and negotiations;
- To propose some recommendations to correct an ineffective peace process.

III. Theoretical Perspective on Peace Talks with the Taliban

The term *peace talks* is broadly used as a synonym of peace negotiation in many peace glossaries. Negotiation is usually defined as face to face talking in order to reach an agreement on a situation that is perceived as a root cause or reason of the conflict or problem (Berghof, 2012). Peace scholars such as Berghof (2012) call it the "way of life" which can pave the way for achieving their aims and getting what they want from others in a conflicted situation. Negotiation or peace talks is not a linear process, rather it is a back and forth communication structured to reach an agreement between conflicting parties who have shared or sometimes opposing interests (Berghof, 2012).

Afghanistan's case does not fit this picture. Peace talks in Afghanistan have not yet reached an agreement on what constitutes national interest of each conflicting party. The most obvious requirements of talking are firstly to agree to talk and secondly the presence of at least two or more conflict parties in negotiation. The Afghan Government's calls for peace talks have not yet been heard by the Taliban. The government keeps calling for peace negotiation, which may be perceived as meaningless from the Taliban's side. The Taliban stated many times that the Kabul Government is a puppet regime that is not worth talking with (Walsh, 2012). The Taliban even stopped talking directly with the United States who is one of the main stakeholders in the latest phase of the Afghan conflict.

The dilemma of peace talks with the Taliban is not the only challenge in the peace negotiation. The past 35 years of Afghanistan history have also been shaped by repeated failures to negotiate a sustainable political settlement (ICG, 2012). In the late 1980s and early 1990s the President of Afghanistan, Dr Najibullah's, attempted to reconcile with the Mujahedeen. He declared his policy of national reconciliation to form a broad-based government including all parties involved in the conflict. To gain support in favour of the newly declared reconciliation policy, Dr Najibullah travelled to many European countries warning that Afghanistan was about to become a safe haven for drug dealers and alerted the international community to the potential civil war between Mujahedeen factions. All these overtures were rejected by the Mujahedeen who considered Dr Najibullah and his regime as a puppet of the Soviet Union (Clements, 2003, p. 178). A similar situation is currently being repeated by the Taliban who addressed President Karzai and his allies in the same way that the Mujahedeen's factions had treated Dr Najibullah and his regime in the 1990s.

Promptly after the downfall of Najibullah's regime in 1992, Mujahedeen factions jockeyed for power in Kabul. The efforts of Pakistan-based Mujahedeen factions resulted in an accord in April 1992 known as the Peshawar Accord. Under the Peshawar Accord, the internal duel of Mujahedeen factions for power was temporarily pacified, but it only lasted for a short time period. The Peshawar deal that apportioned the power between Jamiat-e Islami and other Mujahedeen factions was broken down when Hekmatyar, the leader of Hezb-e Islami, rejected the position of Prime Minister. Hekmatyar, who had received the majority of external support

from the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia was reluctant to give up his quest for total power. Thus, the Prime Minister post was assigned to another commander of Hezb-e Islami, Ustad Abdul Farid (ICG, 2012). Thereafter, initiatives for overcoming the increasing division between Mujahedeen continued and another agreement, the Islamabad Accord, was signed, but shared the same problems. Competition for power and an agreement to pacify each group continued until the rising of the Taliban. In the early 1990s, when most of Jamiat-e Islam i's leaders came to power after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Hekmatyar was trying to actualize his own ambition of obtaining total power. Other Mujahedeen groups including Junbish-e Melli Islami and Hezb Wahdat Islami were competing for their share of power determined in the latest accords both outside and within Afghanistan. Since the abortion of the Peshawar Accord, countless efforts have been undertaken to bring conflicting parties together with the hope of achieving a power sharing agreement for the leadership of the country. All of these efforts have failed.

The difficulties of peace talks with the Taliban are consistent with those experienced during the past 35 years of peace negotiation efforts in Afghanistan. The most obvious weakness of current peace talks with the Taliban is not the emphasis on peace itself, but its content and structure. Values like human rights, women's rights, transitional justice, fair investigation of past crimes committed by the Taliban and other conflict parties, democracy and the protection of vulnerable groups are the most basic elements of peace-building and seem to be absent in the ongoing efforts of peace talks in Afghanistan. For example, human rights violations are considered to be both causes and consequences of violent conflict (Austin, Fischer & Giessmann, 2011). Yet, the manifestation of a violent conflict is seldom confined only to the violations of civil and political rights; violent conflict usually causes the destruction of infrastructure such as schools, streets, public properties and health clinics, affects the socio-economic rights of people, and can cause displacement of the civilian population (Austin, Fischer & Giessmann, 2011, p. 382). The current peace talks intentionally neglect to include the values mentioned above, as they would prevent the conflict actors from reaching a final agreement. Even if the talks persuade parties to abandon violent acts temporarily, there is no guarantee of a sustaining peace deal.

In addition, the most significant issue which has been relatively neglected in the current peace talks is the existence of radical ideological disagreements between the Taliban and the other actors involved. These radical disagreements between the Taliban and the Afghan Government are not addressed in current endeavours for peace and are not considered when attempting to convince the Taliban to lay down their arms and join the government. As most peace scholars insist, when dialogue based on mutual understanding is not possible the tendency is then to focus on agonistic dialogue (Ropers, Giessmann & KoRppenn, 2011, p.65). Meanwhile, repeated efforts by the Afghan Government to engage the Taliban in peace talks have been met with resistance and have caused the Taliban to view the Afghan Government as weak and incapable. Furthermore, violent actions and increasing numbers of civilian victims assassinated by the Taliban is part of their campaign against the central government. For fear of their own safety Afghan civilians are not able to condemn such continued brutality by the Taliban. Under these harsh conditions the government cannot protect civilians and the people themselves cannot do anything to protect themselves from the Taliban. The overall increase in civilian victims discredits the United State's claims that the eleven year military campaign is showing some signs of success and that the Taliban are on the back foot (Boone, 2011). This environment, where people have lost their trust in the government and where the Taliban view the government as a puppet regime, impedes the ability of the government to achieve successful peace talks.

IV. Research Process

This paper is based primarily on literature produced by peace scholars within as well as outside of Afghanistan. I have used many sources, voices and approaches relating to peace negotiations and root causes of the Afghan conflict. Besides working in the realm of peace issues with peace studies centres, I am a researcher at the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, which has equipped me with useful insight into grassroots concerns as well as the concerns of other social and ethnic groups.

Furthermore, I have taken notes of observations experienced while I was travelling in many provinces within Afghanistan. Thus, some of the expressed concerns and findings in the paper are my own observations and perceptions from the reality on the ground.

The whole process of the paper has taken many steps, including a review of current literature, note taking, and observations and interviews with officials and academics conducted during the course of my work. Working with the peace and conflict studies department, the National Centre for Policy Research based in Kabul, provided an opportunity to gain some of the paper's information and insights. I was tasked to prepare a text book for the Kabul University, which required meetings with many peace practitioners across the country and those officials who are involved in the peace negotiation program.

To be brief, this process has taken 4 – 5 months of literature review, reflections, observations, insights and talks with Afghan peace practitioners. The quite pessimistic view of this paper is also due to the difference between the picture the media portrays of the peace negotiation and the reality that exists on the ground.

V. Analysis and findings

a) Content and Structure

An effective transformation of conflict in Afghanistan requires much more than the negotiation between elites and the reintegration of low-level policy (Schirch, 2011). Even though the Afghan Government indicates that it has had irregular communication with many Taliban figures in the past decade, this proclamation has been constantly denied by the Taliban. Even if the peace negotiation between the Afghan Government, its allies and the Taliban become clearer and find new directions of success, doubt will remain over whether or not this is a stable enough foundation from which to build sustainable peace in Afghanistan (Schirch, 2011).

The process of peace talks started with a unique offer to the Taliban by Hamid Karzai, prior to being selected as the chairman of the interim authority of Afghanistan on December 22, 2001, when he announced a general amnesty for all Taliban except the 'criminal' elements within the movement. Mr Karzai said in a public speech in April 2003 that there was a distinction between *"the ordinary Taliban who are real and honest sons"* of Afghanistan and those who *"still use the Taliban's cover to disturb peace and security in the country"* (Tarzi, 2010, pp. 67-78). Mr Karzai warned that no one had the right to harass or persecute anyone under the name Talib/Taliban from that time onward (Tarzi, 2010, pp. 67-78). The abortive attempts for the peace negotiation

continued with much ambiguity that was never clarified. A year later, the Afghan Government introduced a structure for peace talks in which the Taliban was divided into new and old or moderate and stubborn. In reality the Taliban cannot be split into different parts, as its perpetuating unity has been clearly shown in the past 15 years. The most significant challenge that appeared from the onset of this amorphous pattern of peace negotiation was the lack of a coordinated strategy between the Afghan Government and its allies; the United States and NATO countries.

As mentioned above, the failure of peace talks with the Taliban are the result of faulty assumptions on the part of key United States decision makers, Afghan Government policy-makers and the form and content of hard and soft campaigns against the Taliban itself. The policies of the United States and its partners within and outside of Afghanistan have contributed to the strengthening of the Taliban (Shahrani, 2009). Yet, the Karzai government's negotiation policy worsened the prospect of either victory in the war against terrorist groups or success in the peace process. Furthermore, success of the current peace negotiation with the Taliban cannot be secured without having resolved the long-standing border dispute with Pakistan and the lack of recognition for the Durand line. Most Afghan scholars believe that the Taliban phenomenon has been the latest attempt by Pakistan to force Afghan nationalist leaders to recognize the Durand line as an internationally-accepted border. Strengthening of the secular ethno-nationalist Pashtuns who returned to power with the help of the United States backfired because of Pakistan's continued support of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda (Shahrani, 2009).

It has been predicted in many reports and analysis that any efforts from a weak address to convince the Taliban to negotiate with the Afghan Government and its allies will undermine both the credibility of American power and the legitimacy of the Afghan Government. From the inception of peace negotiations the most central concern was that a premature policy of reconciliation with the Taliban would weaken the position of the United States and the Afghan Government. Although the situation in Afghanistan is serious, there seems to be no clear prospect for peace and stability, particularly after 2014 when foreign military assistance is forecasted to be withdrawn. Though such concern is widespread, the situation is by no means

hopeless and could be rectified through a concerted modification of current NATO strategy, including a return to proper counterinsurgency operations (Tellis, 2009). As the last 2-3 years clarified, the exit strategy and immature transition process will not work either. Such a decision would also inspire the insurgents, the bystanders, Afghanistan's greedy neighbours and other regional states to simply wait for a Washington draw down, while following their own interests through proxies that would eventually defeat President Obama's professed intention "*to defeat Al-Qaeda and combat extremism*" (Tellis, 2009). It seems that there is no available option for success in Afghanistan, no "*improve and – exit*" strategy (Tellis, 2009). Along with firm and organized negotiation with those groups who renounce violence and lay down their weapons, an effective long term commitment to build a strong and democratic Afghan state through an "*invest- and- endure*" (Tellis, 2009) strategy will work. While the exit strategy is confirmed and could be completed by 2014, according to Carnegie Endowment's research, for the United States the economic burden that the war in Afghanistan has produced motivates national pressure for the war to be won (Tellis, 2009).

Furthermore, the peace negotiation deadlock emanates not only from the United States' and NATO's strategic mistakes, but the internal ethnic issues and mainstream peace talks also deepened the differences of the anti-Taliban coalition. The pervasive assumption amongst grassroots groups is that the current peace talks are not an all-inclusive process and do not address the grievances of the victims or the root causes of the Afghan conflict. While the Afghan public, by an overwhelming percentage, is still very much opposed to the Taliban considering them the country's biggest threat, they are also desperately seeking the success that ought to have been achieved from the presence of western military forces in their country (Tarzi, 2010). The dominant approach to the current peace process, thus, focuses exclusively on the Taliban and their affiliates- the Hezb-e Islami and the Haqqni network. Lack of national cohesion among different ethnic groups threatens the peace negotiation process and the legitimacy of the state just as much as the insurgency by the Taliban and its support from Pakistan (Sharma, 2012). By concentrating only on the Taliban and its alliances, the process is seen as trying to address the grievances of the Pashtuns while failing to acknowledge the concerns of other ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Hence, it multiplies the risk of rising intra-

Pashtun affairs and deeply undermines non-Pashtun trust in the process. If the current structure of peace talks continues it may alienate other ethnic groups and cause deep societal fragmentation. While the process continues to divide people and the country into many parts it cannot be seen as a potential harbinger of peace (Sharma, 2012).

In addition, the most important issue that is kept hidden is the willingness of the Taliban to participate in the talks. As it has been acknowledged many times by Afghan officials, the Taliban's ideological and political motives of Pashtun superiority and Islamic ideology are extremely significant, encouraging the Taliban to keep fighting against the Afghan Government and its United States and NATO supporters. According to Afghan officials, the conflict will not be resolved until the Afghan Government along with the United States and NATO stop making contact with the Taliban's leadership (Rubin, 2010). While nothing indicates that an outcome of the peace negotiation efforts will be achieved, all are waiting for the potential breakthrough in the talks. The Afghan Government and other peace facilitators must be more realistic and acknowledge that in any conflict situation reconciliation with an opponent or a political group will work only if there is a real need for the group to participate in the process. Likewise, by balancing costs with benefits, the Taliban may realise that there is no reason to entertain the process, especially with the United States and NATO. By seeing a confirmed exit strategy, the Taliban can simply wait and continue their current irregular guerrilla warfare until the United States and NATO countries leave in 2014, while they follow their own agenda to reach total power. Thus, the Taliban does not need to reconcile today for the very simple reason that they do not have to reconcile (Sharma, 2012).

Finally, the Afghan Government is only one of the many parties competing to run a reconciliation program. Afghanistan's government has recently decided to cast the widest net possible, presenting negotiation to almost all insurgent groups of Afghan origin. Even though there are continued peace initiatives between different groups, a significant gap between what is desirable (the creation of a positive peace) and what is achievable remains (a cease-fire, the end of violence and the beginning of legitimate peace talks) and most stakeholders are either reluctant to measure the width of this gap or, for expediencies beyond the Afghan borders, choose to see it as a trench worth ignoring. Meanwhile, the chaotic, haphazard, and seemingly

paradoxical nature of current peace negotiations has given the impression to both elites and large segments of the Afghan grassroots that the agendas of peace initiatives go beyond persuading the Taliban to commit the constitutional system. Concern raised by women, human rights and civil society activists within and outside the country surrounds the tacit meaning of the peace talk process; whether it is to make the Taliban part of the government or if another secret option might be on the table (Tarzi, 2010, pp. 67-78). So, the most obvious picture of the peace negotiation process is that there is still no cohesive, organized and confirmed content and structure for peace in the current peace talk process. Moreover, the last and most immediate issue in the peace talk process concerns sympathy felt by the Afghan Governments towards the Taliban. The centrality of such sympathy is largely hidden, but the recent targeted killing and killing of NATO troops raised many questions in this regard. Along with losing trust in politicians, Afghan civilians are now concerned about the potential for division within the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP).

b) Key Stakeholders

Among various factors and actors of the Afghan conflict, the roles of external actors should not be neglected. When establishing the root causes of ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, the effects of British colonialism and the Cold War era in the region must be considered. The border dispute which has motivated conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan emanates from the collapse of British colonial dominance in the sub-continent, and follows India's partition of the region into two, and then three countries. Similarly, the Cold War was particularly decisive in raising Islamic radicalism and extremist movements.

The role of Pakistan in both periods of Afghan resistance against the invasion of the Soviet Union and in the creation of the Taliban group is very important. The pervasive belief spreading in Afghanistan is that the Taliban phenomenon is a Pakistani project and is the last attempt to enforce Afghans to recognize the Durand line as an international-recognized border (Shahrani, 2009). Thus, among these external actors, Pakistan is universally recognized as the most crucial. Pakistan's governmental institutions, including the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and its military institutions have offered to facilitate the peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban.

Though there is no doubt about Pakistan's influence on the Taliban and peace and conflict in Afghanistan, Pakistan's ultimate objective in Afghanistan is still not clear and there are two competing narratives illustrating the hidden agenda of Pakistan in Afghanistan. The first narrative, accepted by many analysts in Kabul, New Delhi, Washington, in other countries in the region and even Islamabad, is the *strategic depth policy*. According to this policy Pakistan's security institutions see Afghanistan almost entirely through the prism of the Indian threat. In this perspective the principle objective of Pakistan is to limit Indian influence, the risk of 'encirclement' and potential Indian-supported proxy conflicts within Pakistan instigated from across the border in Afghanistan (Shinn, 2011). Even in the case of the outbreak of total war between India and Pakistan, Afghanistan would be seen as a place for retreat in the eyes of Pakistani military institutions. To justify this first narrative, Pakistani efforts to have an influential role in Afghanistan, regardless of the Taliban or any other puppet regime in Afghanistan, can be understood. This narrative also explains why the Pakistani decision making institutions prefer the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan in an orderly way; as the United States forces' presence will challenge their strategic depth policy and favour India. For this reason Pakistani leadership may appear to assist in creating a political settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan Government but in reality this support is motivated by their own national security concerns. There are many reports demonstrating a close relationship between Pakistan's ISI and the Taliban indicating that the role of Pakistan must be taken serious (Waldman, 2010). Pakistan has affirmed their influence over the Taliban and are interested in supporting the peace talk process providing a good opportunity to overcome the current stalemate in peace negotiation with the Taliban (Brahimi & Pickering, 2001).

Iran is another significant actor in the conflict. The relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a neighbour of Afghanistan, can be traced back many decades but 30 years of conflict in Afghanistan has fundamentally changed the relationship between these two countries. When the former Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, Iran was one of the countries that favoured and supported some factions of the Mujahedeen. After September 11, 2001, Iranian officials favoured the United States' attacks in order to dismantle the Taliban regime, but their assistance gradually changed. Current Iran-Afghan relations are strained by the United States

military presence in Afghanistan. The American- Iranian rivalry is gaining in intensity because Iran is considered to be providing the Taliban with weapons and logistical support. The Taliban enjoy Iranian support in many ways including arms, financial funding, technical advice and so forth (Waldman, 2010, p. 12). A sour relation between the United States and Iran has directly affected Tehran's policy towards Afghanistan. For example, Iran officially announced their objection to the United States-Afghan strategic partnership agreement and even penetrated into the Afghan parliament in order to block the approval of the document by Afghan Members of Parliament. In addition, the threat of retaliation for increasing United States sanctions on Iran resulting from the bilateral tensions over Iran's nuclear project have further exacerbated regional friction (ICG, 2012). The role of Iran is not limited to its influence on the Taliban. Iranian support to the Hezb-e- Islami Gulbedden has been increased in recent years (Ruttig, 2011). The apparent Iranian connection with the Taliban and Hezb-e- Islami Gulbedden is not its only means to influence Afghanistan's peace process, instead the cultural, religious and political ties with many former Jihadi groups have also given Iran the chance of infiltration Afghanistan's peace and conflict. A successful peace talk process in Afghanistan requires considering Iran's concerns and presence within the talks with the Taliban.

India is another actor influencing peace and conflict in Afghanistan. The relationship between New Delhi and Kabul has been increasingly strengthened since the fall of the Taliban (ICG, 2012). India's generous aid directed to Afghanistan infrastructure and reconstruction reached 750 billion US dollars in only five years; from 2001 till 2007. India's other initiative in the field of economic development in Afghanistan is the cooperation between the India Export-Import Bank and the Afghanistan Investment Support Agency. This indicates that the political role of India in Afghanistan is linked to its economic influence. The traditional connection with Anti-Taliban groups forms India's long-term alliance with dominant political and ethnic groups within Afghanistan proving to be pivotal for India's role both in peace and conflict in the country. Heated competition that exists between India's main intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and Pakistan's ISI is important to resolve in order to deescalate their proxy wars within Afghanistan. ISI seem to be deeply suspicious of so-called anti-Pakistan activities that are attributed to Indian consulates in provinces that border Pakistan (ICG, 2012).

The same is true for India, which will never accept any government in Kabul who is seen to be acting as a puppet of Pakistan. As most Afghan officials acknowledge, India is an important country in the region and Afghanistan needs its cooperation in the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan (Noori & Mohammadi, 2012).

Amongst influential neighbour countries, the Central Asian states are important actors whose role cannot be neglected in Afghanistan. Sharing a similar history, Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours have similar concerns to Afghanistan about the increase in insurgent activities. Out of the five former Soviet states, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan share a border as well as historical, cultural and economic links with Afghanistan. Activities of central Asian militants supporting Afghanistan's Taliban, mostly in the Northern provinces, has consistently increased since 2009. The Taliban's linkage with fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) are partially the by-product of Al-Qaeda's transnational networks forged in the late 1980s in Loya Paktia under Jalaluddin Haqqani, one of Osama Bin Laden's closest Afghan allies (ICG, 2012). Likewise, the presence of Tajik and Uzbek IMU has helped the Afghan Taliban to partially justify its image as not only a pure Pashtun movement. While Afghanistan's central Asian neighbours are extremely concerned about increasing militant activity along the border, these countries lack the capacity to confront the threat (ICG, 2012).

China's role can also be very effective and constructive in Afghanistan's peace process. China views Afghanistan as a strategic and economic asset that, if it were safe, could be a good location for investment in natural resource extraction. Moreover, China is able to tackle Islamist extremists. By having a strong relationship with Pakistan, China has the capacity to convince Pakistani's decisive institutions and officials to take effective steps in the peace negotiations with the Taliban (Jarvenpaa, 2011). China-Pakistan's long-term relationship is an influential asset that Afghans and other direct stakeholders could utilise as a positive factor in the peace negotiation process. Chinese officials do not seem to take a lead role in the negotiations, but their security and economic interests are reasons for their direct involvement in favour of a peace settlement in Afghanistan. Having a firm and organized peace process supported by the United States and the international community might foster China to help Afghanistan by putting pressure on Pakistan to support a peaceful transition (Brahimi & Pickering, 2001).

Russia is another actor that must be considered as having effective international and regional influence in any peace negotiation project in Afghanistan. Russia is usually concerned with the spill-over effects of extremism and latent conflict in central Asia (Jarvenpaa, 2011). Though Moscow has favoured negotiations with the Taliban, its scepticism still remains, often emanating from the lack of capacity in the current Afghanistan Government to reach a sustainable deal. The ambiguity of the peace negotiation process and the lack of a practical result, allows Russia to challenge the offer for ongoing peace and reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan. As Russian officials know most Taliban and pro-Taliban armed groups since the period of their invasion, Moscow is sceptical of the peace process (ICG, 2012). Moscow's positive involvement as a regional and international actor is required for a comprehensive and functioning peace deal in Afghanistan.

The United States is another stakeholder and the most influential actor involved in Afghanistan's peace deal. The foremost reason for the United States' military presence in Afghanistan is to eliminate the use of Afghanistan and Pakistan as a safe haven for terrorist group operations such as the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and other international terrorist groups. As the events of September 11, 2001 and events following the attacks in other countries show terrorist groups are threatening the United States, European allies and even other countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan. As there is no division in ideological, strategic, operational and even tactical campaigns between the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and the Haqqani network, any successes of the Taliban in Afghanistan would provide a conducive environment for terrorist groups once again. Based on the Taliban's development in Afghanistan in the late 1990s, which resulted in the events of September 11, their activities in the region remain the main source of insecurity and chaos (Jones, 2009). Considering the issues mentioned above, top United States officials are now unfortunately saying that they are rapidly losing the war in Afghanistan. The United States special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan is probing the Taliban to establish whether they are serious about peace talks that discuss anything more than prisoner releases. In addition, the United States must ensure that the Karzai government and his non-Pashtun allies do not think that United States is selling out on their interests (Gwertzman, 2012). It can be expected that the increased violence recently attributed to the Taliban, the United States

and NATO countries will have bloody and lasting ethnic conflict after 2014. Along with a serious deal with Pakistan, convincing them to take effective steps in the Afghan peace negotiations, the United States can also keep their military pressure on the Taliban and preserve parts of their forces after 2014. At the same time the United States and its international partners must show their loyalty by encouraging the development of a new, culturally appropriate political system for Afghanistan (Shahrani, 2009). Furthermore, it is important for the Obama Administration, besides having an intense focus on peace negotiations, to consider an internationally endorsed and viable exit strategy; and not to leave Afghanistan with a bloody civil war ahead.

c) The Grassroots' and Women's Concerns

Grassroots and women's concerns are almost entirely neglected in the current peace process. Raising human rights and women's rights or questioning the Taliban's human rights record seems to spoil the process. Though the grassroots and women's voices have not been heard yet, their trust in the effectiveness of the negotiation program is very important. Grassroots and women's groups fear that they will lose the basic rights that they have gained in the last 10 years. A condition of the peace negotiation is that the rights enshrined in the constitution and other legal commitments for human rights protection must be respected. The fundamental approach to the relationship between human rights violations and the continuation of violent conflict justify the concerns of women and grassroots groups. As many peace research findings show, human rights violations can be both causes and consequence of violent conflict. From findings of research-based scholarship from the field of peace and conflict studies, we can also see that violent conflict is seldom limited to violations of civil and political rights; it also affects the destruction of infrastructure such as streets, schools, public places and health clinics, social and economic rights and causes displacement and immigration of civilian populations (Dudouet & Schmelzle, 2010). To understand the grassroots concern and women's fear generated from the ongoing peace negotiations, one must determine the terms of a suitable peace and protection of human rights that will meet the democratic needs of women and vulnerable social groups in Afghanistan. These concerns are widespread even among woman activists who work within the negotiation process. A female who is a member of the High Peace Council

(HPC) has said that many female members of the HPC also express their concern about their role and influence in the negotiation process. It has been said that some of the HPC's female members have been side-lined from the main consultations raising concerns of peace activist and women activists (Nijssen, 2012).

Moreover, by hearing the name Taliban, many people remember the time when they banned girls' schools and universities, lashed women and were constantly interfering in people's private lives (Bauer, 2002). Moreover, the Taliban's emphasis on re-establishing the Islamic Emirate through forcing international troops to withdraw and the Kabul Government to collapse is really a dreadful nightmare (Ruttig, 2011). A comprehensive and effective peace program requires the presence and trust of grassroots representing crucial parts of the population that are vastly isolated. By concentrating merely on the Taliban that are mostly from Pashtun ethnic groups, the peace process seems to address only the grievances of Pashtuns. The current Taliban-concentrated peace negotiations are weakening the trust of the non-Pashtun grassroots in the process. As described earlier, the current design of the peace process and its elite-orientation may alienate other ethnic groups and cause deep societal fragmentation (Sharma, 2012).

VI. Conclusion

Effective peace negotiations in Afghanistan require a structured process, defined content and national trust of all groups, including women, grassroots, religious and ethnic groups. Peace negotiators, the Afghan Government and other stakeholders must acknowledge their repeated failures and realise that without addressing the root causes of conflict there is no ultimate way to reach sustainable peace in Afghanistan. Offers from a weak position will not convince the Taliban to negotiate with the Afghan Government; rather, it is likely to undermine both the credibility of American involvement and the legitimacy of the Afghan Government. Likewise, there is an opinion that the current peace negotiation stalemate emanates both from the United States' and NATO's strategic mistakes, and from internal divisions and ethnic-based interests.

By identifying the root causes of the on-going conflict in Afghanistan, and aiming to reach a sustainable peace, the role of external actors both in peace and conflict must be recognized. The role of Pakistan as a neighbour and its role in the period of Afghan resistance against the Soviet Union invasion is remarkable. It is almost an accepted belief in Afghanistan that the Taliban phenomenon is a Pakistani project which attempts to force Afghans to recognize the Durand line as an internationally-recognized border and reinforces their deep strategic policy to keep alive the pressure of the sword of Damocles. India, like Pakistan is another actor affecting peace in Afghanistan. The recent years of Indian aid for Afghanistan and closer Kabul-Delhi relations indicate the very generosity of the Indian Government and its people. Its role in peace can be the same as its constructive presence since the fall of the Taliban.

In addition, the Central Asian states are important actors who have similar concerns and a long-shared history and culture with Afghanistan. The ideological relationship between the Taliban and Central Asia's terrorist groups urge both Afghanistan and these countries to work closely together in order to overcome extremism and insurgency in the region. China's and Russia's role in the peace negotiations also should not be neglected. Although China is not likely to take a leading role in the peace negotiation process, it has the capacity to influence Pakistani institutions and officials to take steps to support Afghanistan's peace process. Russia is another actor that is usually concerned with spill-over effects of Central Asia's extremists. Russia is indeed a main actor in the region and Moscow's positive involvement is required in order to have an all-inclusive peace deal in Afghanistan.

The United States is the most influential actor and is central to Afghanistan's peace deal. Besides serious talks with Pakistan, forcing them to take an effective role in the Afghan peace negotiation, the United States can also keep military pressure on the Taliban and preserve parts of their foreign military assistance in Afghanistan after 2014. Along with an intense focus on peace negotiations, the United States must consider an internationally endorsed and responsible exit strategy; more specifically the United States must not leave Afghanistan with a potential bloody civil war ahead.

The presence, support and trust of the grassroots and women are crucial in having a comprehensive peace design. The elite-oriented peace process with no attention to grassroots

and women's concerns in talks with the Taliban is likely to revive the dreadful nightmare that occurred when the Taliban were in power for every individual and vulnerable group within Afghan society.

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