

**Afghan Peace Process in the Current Perspectives (2020-2021)**

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**Abstract**

*Withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan has been one of the long cherished desires of the people of Afghanistan. It is the withdrawal scenario that has provided Afghanistan with the peace settlement in light of the US-Afghan Talks of February 2020. Trump administration remained much concerned with the reduction in the current strength of the US forces in Afghanistan while the Biden administration has shown his concern of reviewing the US policy towards Afghanistan and favors the presence of US forces in Afghanistan. Core objectives of the study include withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan, permanent settlement of the Afghan issue through peace process and the future of the country in the post-US withdrawal scenario. This paper aims at investigating the role of state and non-state actors in the peace process of Afghanistan as provided by the terms and conditions US-Taliban agreement and subsequent strategies adopted by the Trump and Biden administrations.*

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Peace, Perspectives, Talks and Administration

**Introduction**

Peace process in Afghanistan has been one of the greatest desires of the local people of Afghanistan. It was the drawdown scenario of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces from Afghanistan that led to the need for the peace parleys among the government of Afghanistan, the United States and the Taliban. The drawdown scenario in Afghanistan started in 2014 and is about to wind up in April 2021 as per the US-Taliban agreement of February 2020. Credit of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan goes to the Trump administration that has made it a prompt action by tweeting and sharing messages with the Afghan government, regional and international powers (Ayotee, Dunford & Lindborg, 2021). The Trump administration started negotiations with the Taliban in July 2018 on the conditionality of gradual withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan. This was the continuation of the US policy in Afghanistan that she had sought in Afghanistan since 2011 embarking upon the process of peace settlement with the Afghan government and Taliban. Its main purpose was to bring about an end to the Afghan conflict and bring political stability and security in Afghanistan.

Since a period of one year has elapsed since the US-Taliban Talks were held in Doha, Afghanistan still remains far away from peace (Worden, 2021). The US-Taliban deal was a historic benchmark in paving the way for the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan and the subsequent intra-Afghan talks for the political settlement and future stability of the country. With the drawing nearer of the May 1, 2021, the Biden administration is pondering over a 'policy of review' for Afghanistan to determine the slow-moving intra-Afghan negotiations held in Doha, Qatar. The change in US administration, has put both the Afghan government and the Taliban in a position of uncertainty, waiting for the positive response from the Biden administration (Worden, 2021). But this did not bring about an end to the events of insurgency and terrorism since the terrorist groups have threatened to resume attacks against coalition forces provided the foreign troops stay away in Afghanistan beyond May 1, 2021 (Worden, 2021). So, the policy of review by the Biden administration is going to reverse the US policy towards Afghanistan which may affect and further delay the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan.

Objectives of the study include:

- a) Withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan
- b) Permanent settlement of the Afghan through peace process
- c) Future of the country in the post-withdrawal scenario

**Withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan**

As far as the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is concerned, it is significant to know that as per the terms and conditions of the February 29, 2020 US-Taliban Agreement, the main focus of the agreement rest upon four inter-related areas such as counter-terrorism actions by the Taliban, conditional timeframe for the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan, commencement of the intra-Afghan talks, and discussion of conditions leading to the permanent settlement of the cease-fire and bringing in stability to the country (Worden, 2021). So the main focus of this agreement was to deal with the counter-terrorism actions by the Taliban, aiming at strengthening the counter-terrorism strategy of the government so as to maintain peace and security in the country. It was this paradigm of security that kept the entire world change their foreign policies according to their national interest and requirements. Another important aspect of this agreement was to dilate upon the conditional withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan and the timeframe for the total withdrawal of the foreign troops from Afghanistan.

Withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan has been the most Herculean Task since it is fraught with many challenges and hurdles particularly with reference to the exact time frame and future prospects of Afghanistan. There is still no certainty about the total withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan since Biden administration is going to review the withdrawal policy of the Trump administration. The commencement of intra-Afghan talks is another important parameter of this agreement as a consequence of the US-Taliban Talks. Though the intra-Afghan talks have been quite fruitful in determining the future of the government as well as the Taliban with regard to their future strategies of offence or defence yet it has delimited the course of actions of both the government and the Taliban. The fourth important determinant of this agreement was the the cease-fire in Afghanistan and permanent settlement of the issue of insecurity and instability faced by the country. With the change in the administration of the United States, there has been change of policies towards Afghanistan which may result in the delaying of the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan (Tariq, 2020). The previous administration of Donald Trump was in favor of the early withdrawal of the US forces that made him face opposition even from men of his own political circle. The administration of Joe Biden has more pragmatic approach towards the issue of Afghanistan and does not want to spoil her long stay of 19 years' struggle which has brought about peace and stability to a greater extent there.

**Permanent settlement of the Afghan through peace process**

However, the future of Afghanistan cannot be determined by the state actors only. The non-state actors do have a role to play in determining the future of the country. It is also important to mention that Taliban have given guarantee to the effect that the Afghan soil will not be used for terrorist activities by the Al-Qaeda or any other terrorist network for the purpose of vested interests. They have also pledged that the Al-Qaeda or other networks will not be provided and facilitated with the fundraising facilities by the Taliban. But commitments are still required among the various Afghan political factions regarding the causes of domestic conflicts, power-sharing, type of future government, women's rights and integration of the fighting factions into the Afghan National Security Forces (Worden, 2021).

Despite the fact that the US-Taliban have reached agreement followed by the intra-Afghan talks but some of the basic issues of the country have not been discussed by the Afghan government and the Taliban (Tariq, 2020). Peace prospects and settlement of scores by both the Afghan government and the Taliban are very significant for the survival of the country but they have not yet been given proper attention. An important issue which needs great consideration is the resolution of domestic conflict that has been faced by the country since long. Domestic conflict has hit the country since the Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan. It was the leadership vacuum that has led to the current state of civil war in the country since prominent person or political party had the majority to rise to the throne of Afghanistan and run the affairs of the government.

Power-sharing is also an important part of the peace and stability in Afghanistan. Both the US and Afghan government have agreed upon the withdrawal of the US forces from the country and have prescribed a particular timeframe for the total withdrawal of the US forces (Tariq, 2015). The government of Afghanistan has also reached an agreement with the Taliban over the swap of prisoners but no formal for power-sharing has been settled by both the countries between themselves. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country where people of diverse nature belonging to different tribes,

and speaking multi-languages reside in the country. It is in the est interest of Afghanistan that all the state as well as non-state actors should be given their due share in the affairs of the government so as to keep peace and stability in the country. It is only through power-sharing and giving participation to all factions and communities of the country that peace and security coupled with political stability can be maintained.

It is also worth mentioning that the future from of government shuold be determined during the US-Taliban agreement and intra-Afghan talks so as to avoid any disagreement among the various political stateholders. Afghanistan has mostly observed the Presidential form of government since long and particularly in the post 9/11 scenario when that a democratic form of government was established under President Hamid Karzai. He was elected twice for the office of Presidency. But even Presidentail form of government is not the pancea for all the evils in the country since during the last elctions no concensus was developed over the office of the Presidentship between the both the candidates (Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani) had to take the office of Presidency. So, presidentail form of government cannot be said to be the pancea for removing all the evils of the instability, insecurity and disharmony in the country.

Another area of concern for the government of Afghanistan is the issue of women's rights. It had been observed in the last regimeo of Taliban government that women were deprived of their due rights in the country. They were merely confined within the four walls of the rooms and were not allowed to cast their votes nor were they allowed to participate in the elction process nor contest election. During the post 9/11 scenario, they have been given rights of casting votes and partcaptng in the process of election for the seats of contesting elctions. For the stability of the country, it is necessary that women should also particiapte in the affairs of the governmnet so that the image of the Afghan government may not reflect narrow-mindedness and discriminatory attitude towards women.

Integration of the fighting people into the law enforcement agencies has also been one of the most significant dimension of the US-Taliban Talks and intra-Afghan Talks but no attention was paid to the inclusion of the fighters in the Afghan security forces nor was it given special priority in the intra-Afghan talks. Owing to the multi-ethnic nature of the people of Afghansitan, it is in the best interest of the entire population that the fighting people (non-state actors including the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and the ISKP) who had always been anti-state and anti-governmnet should be integrated into the law enforcement agencies of the country in order to be utilized for the purpose of maintaining stability and security in the country (Tariq, 2015). Their inclusion into the domain of the security forces would further enhance the security system of the country since they are well trained and well equipped in the art of modern warfare and techology. They are also well experienced in the art of the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) so as to trap the insurgents nad terrorists through their tactful use of different techniques.

In order for peace and stability to reign in the country of Afghansitan, it is very important to resolve all the internal and domestic conflicts for the sake of bringing in political stability and peace by integrating all the dicordent elements into a single whole (Tariq, 2020). This will help in making the country more safe, secure and politcally strong enough to face all the challenges of terrorism and insurgency. Through the system of power-sharing, all the state as well as the non-state actors will work for the betterment and stability of the country. Determing the type of government through consensus of all the stakeholders of the country would also be a step towards the establishment of a democratic presidential government directly elected whereby all the people should have free choice of voting and being elected to the office of the Presidentship. This will be sound way to safeguated the country against all the aggressions and conflicts.

#### **Future Prospects of Peace in Afghanistan**

US policy has suffered a drastci cahnge during the recent period under Biden administration as compared to the Trump administration. Biden views Afghansitan more important for the united States and wants to ensure the least possible presence of the US troops in Afghansitan for the countering terrorism and counter-isurgency. He is of the view that the presence of a strong contingent of forces will help in redressing the difficult issues faced by the law enforcement agencies of the country. But the most important thaing here is that if the issues of US presence remains in Afghansitan then it would definitely affect the whole scenario of US withdrawal. In such a scenario, the whole peace process will suffer since it will be deviation from the alrady agreed upon agreement between the US and Taliban (What Future for Afghan Peace Talks under a Biden Administration, 2021). So, the Biden

administration looks at the peace process from the prism of some presence of the US army in Afghanistan. Such a case will lead towards the civil war and clash of interest between the US and Taliban, between the US and government of Afghanistan and between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban.

Biden administration is also focusing more on the regional stability as compared to the previous administration of Donald Trump that was more concerned with the early withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan but the present administration is focussing on stability of the region for which the presence of the US forces is very essential in Afghanistan. As a consequence of it, the Biden administration is expected to re-emphasize the need for a 'responsible' withdrawal from Afghanistan (Tariq, 2015). This reconsideration of the US withdrawal by the US administration may also affect the relations of US with the allied partners and would create a sense of mistrust among the various partners of the US over the change in the policy of withdrawal with regard to Afghanistan. The allied partners have already suffered a lot on account of their direct involvement in the war against terrorism and their long stay in Afghanistan since 2001 is indication of their commitment to the United States in the continuation of their policies towards Afghanistan.

In the current scenario, the history of the peace process dates back to 2018 that has showcased the exceptional progress towards the Afghan Peace process. It was the period when efforts were started for the reconciliation of the discordant elements in Afghanistan so as to integrate the whole country into a unified one. These efforts brought fruitful results in the form of US-Taliban Talks, intra-Afghan Talks and the resultant peace negotiations among the various actors for bringing stability and prosperity in the country (Khan, 2020). This has resulted in the increased and unprecedented inclination of Kabul towards the Taliban, the US support for peace process in Afghanistan with the direct involvement of the both the neighboring countries and regional actors.

The road to end up the Afghan war is not an easy task as it is fraught with the pitfalls of various obstacles in the way of lasting peace and durable solution to the Afghan stalemate. But it is also a fact that there are certain people within the Taliban and even Kabul that against the peace process and want to continue to take advantage of the existing *status quo* of the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) that receives the maximum benefit from the conflict between the government and the Taliban (Khan, 2020). So, all the state and non-state actors in Afghanistan are not on the same page, they have their vested interests regarding political stability and peace. The group of actors which is against the peace process favour the present state of affairs so as to avoid any novelty and change in the country. These have been engaged in working against the peace process in Afghanistan, which again is a great loss to the security of the country. For the maintenance of peace and security, consensus of all the people and groups living in Afghanistan is *sine qua non* for it (Khan, 2020). Any political instability arising out of this incoherence may result in the civil war and fighting of various non-state actors against one another. This will bear a direct imprint on the regional and global security (GIESMANN, 2020).

In the case of US withdrawal scenario, India is also interested in safeguarding her own interest in the region and does not want to lead towards any such cases giving relocation for ungoverned spaces where terrorism and proxies can flourish (Hindu, 2021). India has been one of the major stakeholders in Afghanistan by having provided developmental assistance of about \$ 3 billion during the last few years. India is interested in developing ties both with the Afghan government as well as the Taliban in order to capture both the Afghan government and the Taliban and is not in a position to lose either of the two. This has great strategic significance for the Indian government as this would weaken Pakistan on both its eastern and western border (Tariq, 2015). So, the Indian presence in Afghanistan is linked with her strategic presence so as to further weaken Pakistan and provide assistance to the Afghanistan for alienating it from Pakistan that has stood by her neighboring country through every thick and thin.

### **Conclusion**

Peace Process in Afghanistan is very important for the survival and security paradigm of the country. Many efforts have been made by the regional and global powers including the United States, Pakistan, China, Russia and Iran. For the continuation of the process of peace, withdrawal of the US forces from is very important as has been agreed upon between the United States and Taliban, followed by the intra-Afghan Talks which provide the way for the future stability of Afghanistan. Efforts were started for the drawdown of the NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014 when the United States

decided to reduce the existing strength of the US foreign forces in Afghanistan. It also provided for the winding up of the NATO mission in Afghanistan and substituted it with the new mission under the nomenclature of the Resolute Support Mission (RSM). Under the RSM, the strength of the NATO forces reduced to about 8,600 whereby they were entrusted with the duty of the training, assisting and funding the Afghan National and Defence Security Forces.

The Trump administration remained very much concerned with withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan and pursued a policy of peace deal with the Taliban (Tariq, 2020). The peace deal was prompted by the US-Taliban Talks of February, 29, 2020 which made provision for very limited number of foreign troops inside Afghanistan. At present, the strength of the US forces in Afghanistan stands at 25,00 and is expected to leave the country by May 1, 2021. It was Donald Trump who made a hurriedly decision regarding the US withdrawal from Afghanistan though he was opposed tooth and nail by the members of his own political party. Members of his political party raised many objections over the hasty decision of the then President since it was against the national interest of their country to leave Afghanistan in a short span of time.

Peace and stability in Afghanistan can last subject to the provision of certain conditionalities. Some of these deal with the counter-terrorism actions strategies by the law enforcement agencies for countering terrorism and insurgency in any part of the country. This aims at the strong strategy on part of the government for taking both offensive and defensive actions necessary for safeguarding the installations and infrastructure of the country. Withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan is another important dimension of the peace process. The withdrawal of the foreign forces is as necessary for the political stability and security of the country as medicine is for the patient. But it is also important to pinpoint that the Biden administration has been pondering over reviewing the US policy towards Afghanistan which may make allowance for the presence of some US forces in Afghanistan in order to guarantee the stability and peace in Afghanistan. Now, this shift in the change of policy by the President of the US does not bode good for the Afghani people.

Commencement of the intra-Afghan Talks and the permanent peace settlement in the country is another area of great concern for the peace process in Afghanistan. The intra-Afghan Talks provide for another platform for the government of Afghanistan and Taliban as it is through this talks that they have been able to discuss important issues with each other (Tariq, 2020). The most significant part of this talks is the exchange of prisoners by both the government and Taliban. The talks would bear a direct impact on the future prospects of peace and stability of the country since they have got the opportunity to come close to each other and discuss certain issues relating to the future set up of the government. This will enable the Taliban to play their due role in the affairs of the government and become a stakeholder in the politics of the country.

Peace and stability in Afghanistan can become her destiny and may shape the future politics of the country subject to certain conditionalities and pledges made by the various stakeholders. It is a fact that Taliban are the key actors and can do a lot in making the country more stable, prosperous and secure through their efforts. They have pledged not to facilitate or assist the Al-Qaeda or other network using the Afghan soil for terrorist activities. But it would be more fruitful if they adhere to their promise and oppose all the terrorist moves by the other terrorist organizations. Another important parameter of the stability of Afghanistan is the coordination between the state and non-state actors and must act on the same page so as to save their country from further deterioration. So, some of the most important steps necessary for the peace and prosperity of Afghanistan is the resolution of internal and external conflict through peaceful means and negotiations. Power-sharing formula among the various actors in Afghanistan is also of great significance as it would enable all the actors to participate in the affairs of the government and avoid the sense of deprivation on part of any party. Presidential form of government based on the doctrine of direct election would also help resolve the issues of civil war and disharmony. Protection of the women's rights and enabling them to participate in the affairs of the state would be another contributory factors towards the peace process. Last but not the least is the integration of the fighting people by providing them the opportunity to fight for the country and not against the country. This would make the country stronger and more sound resulting in the emergence of Afghanistan as a peaceful and secure country.

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