

Afghan Peace Process Conundrum PART-II

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Afghan Slicing: Role of External Actors

Following the US President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, a window of opportunity appears to have opened for a myriad of state actors to intervene in the Afghan Peace Process in the past several months. For China, Afghanistan lies at the heart of the ancient maritime silk route, and any insecurity in the region will impede its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its expanding economic footprint in the region through mineral investment and ownership of mines further incentivise the prioritisation of its diplomacy for shielding its economic and security interests.

Similarly, Russia had pre-emptively sought to establish itself as a peace broker alongside advancing security assurances from the Taliban against the Chechen separatists in the Central Asian region succeeding the US's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Here, it is essential to note that contrary to Russia's previous engagements with the Taliban, the former took a contrarian approach in its policy towards the Taliban, the descendants of the Mujahideen who fought the 1979 Soviet invasion.

In the same way, the coordination between Iran and the Taliban has significantly increased where the former which propagates Shia Islam and the latter pertains itself as an anti-Shia militant organisation experience a convoluted marriage of convenience. Iran's deteriorating economy due to the imposition of the US sanctions, its opium smuggling business coupled with the mounting presence of ISIS in western Afghanistan and along the Iranian borders, have made the former to host the Taliban and deliberate the Afghan peace process.

Further, the resumption of the politics of peace has also taken a new angle with Pakistan's willingness to take the bait and intervene in the peace process to gain profound strategic depth into Afghanistan while simultaneously undermining India's influence in the region. However, this part of the article will try to critically evaluate the implications Afghanistan's immediate eastern and western neighbours will have on the Afghan peace process broadly

while accounting for India's geopolitical manoeuvring amidst the peace process and rising US–Iran trade deal tensions.

Iran: A Western Neighbour

As the tensions over trade coupled with the recent assassination of Iran's Major General Qasem Soleimani by the US escalate between Washington and Tehran, Afghanistan officials fear that it could harm and slim their chances to attain peace with the Taliban. Richard Olson, the former US special envoy to Afghanistan, believes that Iran would retaliate by targeting the US forces housing in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon where it maintains strong proxies as compared to Afghanistan. So far, Iranian leaders have not only targeted a US base camp in Iraq bearing no casualties but experienced severe backlash and protests following their admission that its military unintentionally shot a Ukrainian plane on January 8, 2020, killing 176 individuals including several Iranians. As the escalations heighten, the US would probably uphold a comparatively strong military presence in Afghanistan to intimidate Iran from rear-end, dissolving the prospect of a peace process.

Further, if the Taliban decides to support Iran to compensate for the latter's hospitality and take refuge against the American and Afghan forces, the peace process would be disrupted from both ends. Another looming concern is that if the peace deal falls through and the US decides to stay longer, there is a probability of Iran supplying the Taliban with military assistance to keep Americans fighting an asymmetrical war. The Afghan government realises that a war against Iran would result in an inconclusive peace deal. Moreover, it might further generate internal strife between minority groups, militias and the Afghan government causing further instability.

Pakistan: An Eastern Neighbour

Pakistan, being one of the most significant external actors in the political affairs of Afghanistan, has over the years made several attempts to entice the latter in its strategic embrace. India's lengthy and robust friendship with Afghanistan has further generated high sensitivity for Pakistan which seeks to dampen their relationship by stressing on Pak–Afghan common bonds of history and religion. Pakistani strategists have long asserted Pakistan as an expert player in the region and treated Afghanistan as its strategic backyard, guaranteeing stability if the latter followed its footsteps.

However, Pakistan's support for the Mujahideen and the Taliban has backfired and hampered any progression in Pak–Afghan relations. Following Afghanistan's decision on the US–Iran tensions, Pakistan too repudiated opting sides or allowing foreign forces to use its land, further exacerbating tensions in the region. While Pakistan served as a mediator in carrying out the peace process, its influence over the Taliban cannot be overlooked. Over the years, Pakistan has been accused of sheltering Taliban and members from the Haqqani network. Pakistan's outreach and influence on the Taliban have allowed it to gain significant strategic depth inside Afghanistan and simultaneously undermine India's influence in the region. If tensions between Washington and Tehran persist and Afghanistan is used as a battleground, undermining its peace and stability, then it can be anticipated that the Taliban's outsized political role will hinder India-Afghan relations. Political turmoil and instability might further encourage Pakistan to conduct attacks through its terror proxies in Kashmir, India.

India's Geopolitical Manoeuvring and Escalating US–Iran Tensions

From China's BRI and its expanding economic footprint for mineral resources in Afghanistan, Pakistan's attempt to sabotage resilient India-Afghan relations, to Russia's effort to establish itself as an active player in Afghanistan, the road to peace with conflicting interests in Afghanistan remains tricky. India has long shared strong cultural and political relations with Afghanistan, which has notably improved in the recent Modi–Ghani Era. While the Modi government has made attempts to support the Ghani government, most notably by recognising the legitimacy of the current Afghan elections outcome, the government needs to unfasten the bind caused due to escalating US–Iran tensions. The tensions between the two countries have not only resulted in a domestic price upsurge in crude oil, and dip in investments and economic growth but holds significant security implications for India in Iran and Afghanistan. Until now, India has spent over \$ 2 billion in Afghanistan through humanitarian aid, infrastructure and various other development projects which are community-driven in spheres comprising water, health, education, agriculture, renewable energy and skill development.

Some of the notable infrastructure investments include the Afghan parliament in Kabul, the Salma dam in Herat, the Zaranj-Delaram highway in Nimruz and the Indira Gandhi Institute for Child Health in Kabul. Provided the Washington–Tehran tensions escalate, not only would the political turmoil dissolve any prospect of the peace process in Afghanistan but also make

India's investment in the region vulnerable. The Zaranj-Delaram highway, which is of significant strategic importance for India and connects the Indian-constructed Chabahar port in Iran to the Afghan ring road and all its provinces has been under Taliban control since 2011. Therefore, any further complications and escalating tensions between Iran and the US, might further exacerbate the internal political turmoil already experienced in Afghanistan and conflict over the Taliban's influence in the region with India's strategic interests.

Further, the Chabahar port in Iran which is a trilateral project involving India, Iran and Afghanistan has proved vital for the former's trade and strategic interests since it helps counter China's growing influence in the Arabian Sea through the latter's development of Gwadar Port. While the US had promised to keep Iran's Chabahar port out of its sanction, detrimental strains can be expected between Afghanistan and Iran due to the US decision to dissolve the peace process.

Moving forward, India needs to maintain its relationship with countries such as the US, Iran and Afghanistan while countering Pakistan's sway over the Taliban. India must place its national interests at the forefront, which might demand diplomatic engagement with the enemy. By proactively engaging in the peace talks with the Taliban and other parties while articulating Afghanistan's greater involvement in the process, India would be able to successfully manoeuvre its geopolitical interests.

Finally, it should try to act as a mediator between Iran and the US to reduce growing hostilities. So far, India has steered clear of any military engagement and exercised its legitimacy and sway over Afghanistan mostly through aid and infrastructure. However, changing times hold more considerable uncertainty in the international system, and any decision to either opt deeper engagement with Afghanistan or stay away from regional affairs will have broader implications for India's strategic manoeuvring in the future.

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