

REPORT



**Islamabad
Policy Institute**
Supporting Dialogue for Peace & Development

Afghanistan Conundrum: Regional Quest for Peace and Stability

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Afghanistan Conundrum: Regional Quest for Peace and Stability

Rapporteur

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Islamabad Policy Institute Pakistan

Introduction

The evolving situation in Afghanistan presents a new set of challenges for regional peace and stability. The irresponsible withdrawal of US troops without reaching a permanent, all-inclusive political settlement, further deteriorated the situation. Now, the ultimate onus to stabilise the war-torn country in the aftermath of the Taliban seizure of power in Kabul lies on neighbouring countries, which through facilitating peace talks and discouraging violence can play a substantive role in normalising the situation in the country. The primary obstacle lying before the Taliban for smooth functioning of their regime is the securing international recognition. The recognition will remain a distant dream unless the Taliban ensure the provision of human rights for its citizens, particularly women, children, and minorities.

Prof. Sajjad Bokhari
Executive Director
Islamabad Policy Institute

- We are witnessing an evolving situation in Afghanistan. Repercussions can be felt across the region. The ripple effect of the deteriorating law and order situation in Afghanistan can threaten the peace and security of its neighbours, particularly Iran, Pakistan, and China.
- It is, however, important to assess what role can the regional actors play in stabilising the ground situation as an already war-torn Afghanistan descends into further strife?
- The Taliban, who were emboldened by the hasty withdrawal of US forces from the country, intensified their assaults on the ill-fated Afghan people and managed to take control of large swathes of the country's territory. The Taliban have since then ignored all peace initiatives and talks in Doha have, therefore, remained stalemated.
- The US-led airstrikes carried out on behalf of the Afghan government have further infuriated the Taliban, who have reacted more fiercely to them.
- It is feared that the Kabul government would not be able to sustain the Taliban offensive for long.
- The Taliban have captured multiple border-crossings, which poses a serious security threat to the security and trade of neighbouring countries. The Afghan problem has the potential to create a global refugee crisis.
- Despite repeated assurances from the Taliban that they would not let Afghan soil be used against other countries, there exist fears of growing extremism and the resurgence of militancy in the region.
- The regional actors cannot just watch the developing situation in Afghanistan from the sidelines, as the ground situation deteriorates sharply. Regional countries have sought to engage the Taliban for peace and security on their border.
- It is important to find out how the regional countries can handle the Afghanistan conundrum and pave the way for a peace process aimed at reaching an all-inclusive, comprehensive, and Afghan-led political settlement. Failure to which can result in a spillover of terrorism and

displacement of millions of innocent Afghan people. It is, therefore, extremely important to take stock of views from scholars and experts from countries in the region that could potentially be an immediate victim of Afghan instability.

Amb. Aizaz Ahmad Chauhdry
Director General
Institute Strategic Studies Islamabad

- The prospects of civil war or infighting in Afghanistan have turned into a grim reality. We have been saying to “the United States that there was no military solution”, and we will say the same to the Taliban and the Afghan government that there is no military solution to the unfolding crisis in Afghanistan.
- The most important message regional countries can give to all factions in Afghanistan is: “they must quit fighting and start talking”. War was not an option but diplomacy is essential to solve the Afghan crisis. There have been numerous attempts for talks in Doha but we have not seen results.
- The withdrawal of US troops should have been accompanied by a final political settlement among Afghan groups. Pakistan’s expectations that withdrawal of the US would be responsible did not materialize. It was an irresponsible move.
- The US abandoned Afghanistan and now it must partially accept the responsibility for bringing chaos to the country. It should facilitate the talks for bringing peace to the country.
- The ultimate responsibility for peace in Afghanistan lies with the Afghans themselves. It should be an “Afghan-owned and Afghan-led process”. No regional country wants to interfere in the crisis.
- The Afghan government wasted a lot of time in undertaking meaningful talks with the Taliban. It was an internationally recognized, legitimate government and a primary stakeholder in the conflict. After the US-Taliban deal in February 2020, the Afghan government remained aloof from the issue and presented one condition or the other to engage with the Taliban. As a result, the talks have not really been result-oriented.
- If the Afghan government expects Pakistan to fight the Taliban for them, it is not a legitimate expectation. We have our own problems.
- The Afghan government should engage with all political factions seriously now instead of resorting to blame-game tactics.
- If the Taliban continue to resort to violence, the international community would not accept the government formed through military means. The Taliban should be more flexible and work for an all-inclusive government.
- Two important tasks lie ahead for regional states:
 - First, they can facilitate peace talks between different warring Afghan factions
 - Second, they can use their influence to stop them from resorting to violence.

- Pakistan had planned to organize a regional conference on July 16-17 on Afghanistan but it was postponed at the request of the Afghan government. It is deplorable, as unless all countries play their part, peace will remain elusive.
- There is “full consensus” in Pakistan that a peaceful Afghanistan is good for the region. We have no favourites in Afghanistan.
- The allegations of Afghanistan that Pakistan aids the Taliban are misleading. Around 90% of the fighting cadre of the Taliban is in Afghanistan, and those who visit Pakistan, only come here to meet refugees and their relatives.

Dr. Guo Xuetang**Director Institute of International Strategy and Policy Analysis, Shanghai**

- Peace in Afghanistan is a common goal of all regional states.
- There should be more multilateral cooperation among neighbours of Afghanistan, particularly, China, Pakistan, and Iran. I believe that these three countries are a strong force and can play a better role in bringing these political settlements.
- A military solution is not an option. There is a need to form a political consensus for a lasting peaceful settlement of the Afghan crisis.
- Pakistan, China, and Iran have more responsibilities than other regional states in the post-withdrawal economic development of the country.
- Outsiders, like the US, Turkey, Russia and India, have been involved deeply in Afghanistan for decades. These are not responsible states. Even the US has left Afghanistan. It is an irresponsible state. How can we say that the US will be a responsible state in the post-civil war Afghanistan?
- It is a surprise that Turkey wants to engage more militarily. Turkey is far from the region. US troops are leaving, European troops are leaving but Turkey is engaging itself in the country.
- As far as Russia is concerned, we understand it used to be a neighbour of Afghanistan before its disintegration. It now wants to maintain peace in Central Asian states and is engaged through Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.
- Even India cannot play a responsible role in the crisis. I doubt Indian intentions in post-civil war Afghanistan.
- Outsiders should not be allowed as they will further deteriorate the situation.

Mirwais Yasini**First Deputy Speaker of the Lower House of the Afghan Parliament**

- The US has invested tens of billions of dollars in the civil development of Afghanistan for the last twenty years, I doubt our immediate neighbours will be able to invest this huge sum.
- Civilians are the ultimate victims of the ongoing violence in the country.
- The spillover of the Afghan war will be felt in the country’s immediate neighbours. The recent intensification of terrorist attacks in Pakistan is a glimpse of it.

- An emergency ceasefire should be announced to bring a halt to the prevalent blood-shedding without any preconditions attached to it.
- The role played by regional countries is laudable but not enough.
- This is the era of the internet and technology. Terrorism will spread more quickly than it spread all over some decades ago.

Dr. Foaz Izadi**Associate Professor at Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran**

- The first goal will be to collaborate with President Ashraf Ghani without abandoning support for other Afghan allies.
- Iran's goal is to avoid any confrontation with the US, and to ensure that the Afghan land is not used to attack Iran. It is because we do not share cordial ties with the US. The US is confronting Iran militarily, economically and politically.
- It was welcoming news for us when we heard that the US was withdrawing troops from the Afghanistan. The US departure from Afghanistan was one of Iran's goals.
- There is no military solution to the Afghan crisis.
- Iran also worries about the flow of a new wave of Afghan refugees if the situation further deteriorates.
- President Raisi will keep Afghanistan and Pakistan more important as his administration is paying close attention to regional issues.
- Iran has concerns about the increasing footholds of Daesh in Afghanistan.
- Security matters including border management will be an important task for the Iranian government.

Dr. Murat Aslan**Faculty Member at Hasan Kalyoncu University & Researcher at SETA**

- The vacuum left by the hasty withdrawal of the US is being filled by the Taliban.
- Consistency is required in accordance with the perceptions; of the actors in Afghanistan, of the international community, and in rules and deeds. This motivation will break the Taliban's quest to dominate all over Afghanistan. If there is inconsistency, the Taliban would easily exploit it.
- There could be three expected scenarios emerging in the post-civil war Afghanistan:
 - a civil war which is unfavorable for all
 - Division of Afghanistan between the Taliban and the government
 - Peace and reconciliation, the most favorable
- As long as the Taliban perceive themselves as victors, they would not tend to peace and capture more districts; so they must be pushed to reconciliation.
- The strength of the Taliban is religious sentiments, which requires a firm stance from clerics in Afghanistan, Pakistan and all neighboring Muslim countries that such views cannot be validated.

- Turkey's presence is not about combat missions but to protect the international airport so that the Afghan people do not get isolated, but that can only happen with the consent of all the stakeholders in Afghanistan without which Turkey's role would diminish.

IPI Findings

1. The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan can have dire consequences for regional peace and stability, but its immediate neighbours, particularly Pakistan and Iran, could be the most affected of all.
2. The Taliban control of Kabul can undermine the provision of human rights in the country. It can pose threats to trade between countries and have a potential to generate a new wave of refugees.
3. There is a growing fear of rising militancy and extremism in the wake of the Taliban forming a new Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. Many regional insurgent groups may draw encouragement from the Taliban movement and revive their dormant struggle against regional countries.
4. There is no military solution to the Afghan conundrum and the US withdrawal confirms Pakistan's position of solving the crisis through an all-inclusive political settlement.
5. The US should accept the responsibility of bringing chaos to the region. It should now play a spearheading role in facilitating peace talks between all stakeholders in the country.
6. The dilly-dallying of the Afghan government in engaging with the Taliban after the Doha peace agreement of February 29, 2020 resulted in widening distrust between the Taliban and the government. The talks, therefore, were no more result-oriented.
7. More than 90% of the Taliban insurgents reside within Afghanistan and blaming Pakistan for aiding the Taliban is an ill-judged position.
8. The US has lost its moral leverage and political influence in the wake of its hasty withdrawal and leaving the Afghans in the lurch.
9. India cannot play a positive part in the development of Afghanistan because it has always opposed CPEC and has expansionist designs in the region.
10. There should be a consistency in the perceptions of regional and global actors to combat any monolithic power dominating the Afghan affairs in the future.