

A RAY OF HOPE FOR AFGHANISTAN

// Over the last few years the security situation has changed significantly

The security situation in Afghanistan has changed significantly over the last few years. The reasons for this are the persistent resistance of the Taliban and the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) in different parts of the country. The failure of the Afghan government and the international community to bring peace and the rise of IS have significantly increased the concerns of the regional players (Russia, Iran and Pakistan) regarding their own security. Suddenly they find themselves on the same side, countering IS and exerting pressure on the Taliban as well as on the Afghan government towards a peaceful settlement of the Afghan conflict. And it seems that they are ready to play an assertive role. This PRIF Spotlight attempts to analyze the post-IS security situation in Afghanistan and to make suggestions for the prospects of peace talks amidst the evolving policy shift of neighboring countries.



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The failure of the Afghan government and its international partners, in combination with the changing political landscape in Central Asia as well as in the Middle East, provided an opportunity for IS fighters to begin operations in Afghanistan. The first signs of IS in Afghanistan appeared in 2014, and the group announced the establishment of its “Khorasan Province” in January 2015. A recent report by the New York Times suggests that IS is more active in Afghanistan than ever before. Recently, U.S. and Afghan officials have confirmed a growing presence of IS in northern Afghanistan, especially in Jowzjan Province. The main targets of IS are Afghan government forces,

their NATO allies, and the Afghan Taliban. They are also attacking Shia mosques to provoke sectarian violence and are using suicide bombing indiscriminately against civilians and other targets. Most recently, on January, 24, 2018, IS attacked the “Save the Children” office in Jalalabad Province, killing 3 and injuring 25. Later in the same week, they attacked the National Military Academy in Kabul, killing 11 cadets and injuring 16 others.

The rise of IS and its growing activities have changed the dynamics of the politics of Afghanistan both internally and externally. To begin with, IS has challenged the dominance of the Taliban in their respective areas. IS provided an alternative platform for the disgruntled members of the Taliban and recruited them actively. Though IS and Taliban may have some common grounds, they differ fundamentally on a number of issues. The Taliban assert that their struggle is confined to Afghanistan only and that their core objective is to expel foreigners. By contrast, IS operates across borders and has an international agenda to establish a universal Islamic government (Caliphate).

The presence of IS poses serious threats to the neighboring key powers as well. For example, Pakistan is wary of IS’s growing influence in Afghanistan for a number of reasons. Pakistan launched operation *Zarb e Azab* in June 2014 to rid its soil of various anti-Pakistan militant groups, most prominently Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). As a result of this operation, many TTP leaders took refuge in Afghanistan and joined

forces with IS. Though IS is not as strong in Pakistan as it is in Afghanistan, there is every possibility that unless it is defeated or curbed in Afghanistan, it may spread to Pakistan.

Likewise, Iran, a predominantly Shia country, is one of the chief targets of IS in the region. Ideologically, IS is anti-Shia and regards Shiites as apostates and infidels; it has attacked the Shiite Hazara community in different parts of Afghanistan. Reports suggest that IS is gaining strength in the provinces of Helmand and Farah, which are Afghanistan's border areas with Iran.

Russia is deeply concerned about the rise of IS in Afghanistan, as it has been fighting the group in Syria. The Russian government is also disturbed by the presence of Uzbek fighters fighting for IS in northern Afghanistan, which is close to the border of several Central Asian states.

In view of the above analysis, IS is certainly the common enemy of the key players, i.e., Taliban, Pakistan, Iran and Russia. Historically, Pakistan has always been a staunch supporter of the Taliban despite all the pressure exerted on it. Iran and Russia, by contrast, have often been at odds with the Taliban in the past, but the growing influence of IS in Afghanistan has brought them all on the same page. This might now provide a game-changing window of opportunity for a renewed attempt at peace negotiations.

The changing stance of the Taliban

The Taliban have been fighting in Afghanistan for the last 17 years. They thrive on the narrative that the U.S.-led forces are "occupying forces," and that the

Afghan government is merely a "puppet regime." They use this narrative to justify their attacks against the government and foreign forces. Last year, when the Trump administration announced a more aggressive strategy in Afghanistan, it proved to be counter-productive, as the Taliban responded with an increase in the number of attacks.

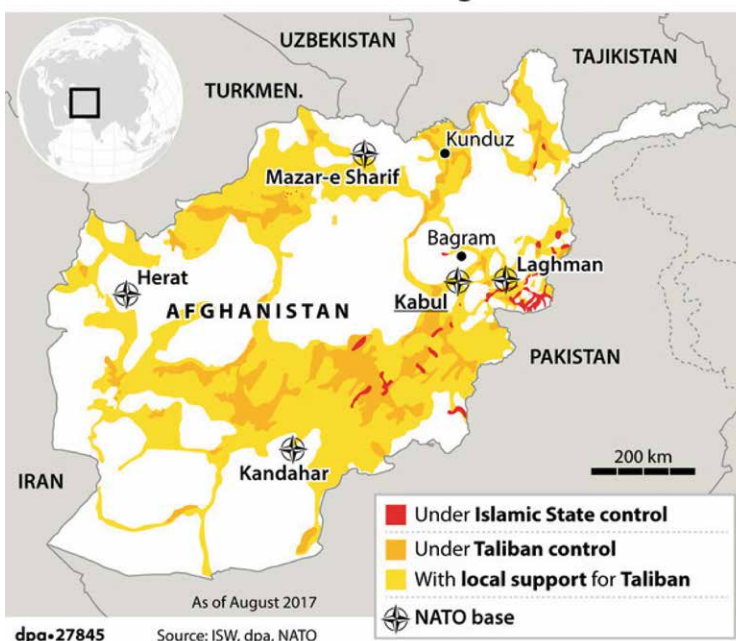
Although in the last few years the Taliban have succeeded in controlling more territories, they know that they cannot win the war by military means alone. In addition, there is growing pressure towards peace from a majority of their own supporters. It is due to local pressure (tribes and elders) that they allowed schools to remain open in the areas under their control. They not only allowed the boys to go to school; even the girls can attend the schools, though with some restrictions. The Taliban are now also cooperating with NGOs which are providing polio vaccination to the children.

The regional contacts and exposure also have a profound effect on the Taliban. This is why they refrained from harming the local population during the few days in which they controlled Qunduz Province, and instead mixed with the local population to show their peaceful face to the world. The support for the TAPI project, a joint-venture project connecting Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India (TAPI), is another positive gesture by the Taliban. Overall, then, one can argue that the Taliban perspective and positioning has also changed and "evolved" over the years to a certain extent.

The emergence of IS, the persistence of war and local pressure have impelled the Taliban to offer bilateral talks with the U.S. The U.S. administration, after pressure from the Afghan government, rejected the offer and demanded that the Taliban talk with the current Afghan government. The Taliban are reluctant to do so because they believe that the decision-making power lies in the hands of the U.S. and not the Afghan government. However, despite their reluctance, if serious attempts are made, the Taliban are likely to take part in the negotiations with the Afghan government, as they have occasionally done in the past.

During the last ten years, there were a few occasions on which the Taliban agreed to initiate talks with the Afghan government despite internal opposition. For example, Taliban representatives talked with their Afghan counterparts in Qatar (in 2013 and 2016), they attended trilateral meetings (Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Taliban) and also responded to Russian and Chinese peace initiatives. None of these bilateral and trilateral negotiations bore any results, as they lacked a comprehensive strategy. The changed situation and new pressure on the Taliban may now promise more success.

Taliban and Islamic State in Afghanistan





A suicide bombing against an office of the charity 'Save the Children' in Jalalabad, Afghanistan January 24, 2018 (Photo: © dpa/AA).

The pressure on the Afghan National Unity Government (NUG)

The National Unity Government (NUG) is headed by Dr. Ashraf Ghani, the President, and his Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Dr Abdullah Abdullah. Since its formation, the unity of the NUG has deteriorated into disunity over the power sharing between the President and the CEO. The international community has also been critical of the NUG for its failure to take bold steps to curb corruption and nepotism and to strengthen the rule of law in the country. Afghanistan ranks 169 out of 176 in Transparency International's global corruption list – an alarming situation for the Afghan government, Afghan society and the international partners.

Ironically, the NUG is far from being united on almost all fronts. There is a lack of cooperation and coordination between government officials and the broader security apparatus, which adversely affects the security of the country. The Taliban and IS continue to benefit from this volatile situation. Despite the partial turn towards cooperation and more peaceful means in some areas, attacks have increased in other parts of the country. The 27 January 2018 ambulance attack by the Taliban in the capital Kabul was disastrous – more than 100 innocent civilians lost their lives, and more than 240 were injured.

The National Unity Government (NUG) is fighting both the Taliban and IS simultaneously. Its position has weakened, and it no longer has the upper hand. This is demonstrated by the fact that the Afghan government has offered recognition of the Taliban as a legitimate political party as a confidence-building measure to draw them into peace talks. It would be safe to conclude that due to internal insecurity and the growing number of Afghan casualties, the current NUG faces

immense pressure from the public and parliament to arrive at some sort of cease-fire that provides some relief to the population. In addition, the external pressure is mounting as well. Russia, Pakistan and Iran have been insisting on a resumption of talks with the Taliban. Russia, along with Uzbekistan, has also offered to host and provide support for any prospective peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Moreover, though the U.S. rejected the Taliban's demand for bilateral negotiations, it has also pressed the NUG to create a better environment for the initiation of negotiations.

The way forward

Despite the presence of the international community and its economic and military support for the successive Afghan governments, there is growing insecurity and instability in the country. The emergence of IS in Afghanistan in 2014 increased the regional powers' concern for their own security. It has alarmed the neighboring powers, which is evident from the fact that they are now playing a more pronounced role in Afghanistan. The presence of a bigger threat in the shape of IS has forced the regional powers to work with the Taliban to counter the influence of the group. The recent Afghanistan peace conference held on 25-27 March 2018 in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, is indicative of the regional interest in peace. The participants of the conference stressed the need for a peaceful settlement of the Afghan war and recommended negotiations with the Taliban.

There are also growing voices in favor of a peaceful settlement of the Afghan issue within NATO countries. In February 2018, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said at a press conference that "NATO welcomes any effort for a political solution to the conflict

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in Afghanistan.” (tolonews.com) It is widely believed that the Afghan issue cannot be solved by military means alone, and thus it requires more cooperation and a greater awareness among all the stakeholders involved in the current conflict. It would be safe to conclude that apparently all stakeholders, with the exception of IS, agree on the initiation of peace talks with the Taliban, but differences remain on the mechanism. The reason why IS is an exception and is considered beyond reconciliation lies in the fact that they are striving to create a caliphate which would not only rule Afghanistan but would encapsulate the entire region. The IS has already made threatening statements against the neighboring countries and is targeting the Shia and Hazara communities on the basis of its ideology.

The biggest challenge in initiating or devising a mechanism for peace talks lies in the fact that each of the parties involved has some reservations or conditions attached to the proposed negotiations. For example, the Taliban want to negotiate directly with the U.S., whereas the Afghan government considers direct U.S./Taliban talks to be against their interests. The previous attempts at negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government bore no fruits because no serious and holistic effort was made. The Qatar peace talks moved at a snail’s pace and were adversely affected by the lack of confidence and the political point-scoring on both sides. Moreover, the regional powers did not play a significant role.

Thus, the way forward to deal with the current situation is to work on a comprehensive peace strategy under the umbrella of the United Nations as the world did at the Petersburg Conference near Bonn in 2001.

The world should realize that the Afghan war is not a war between two parties; it is a war in which the integrity of the international community is at stake. Therefore, the U.S., NATO, Russia and Afghanistan’s neighbors should devise a formula or mechanism for the initiation of peace talks or a conference for the peaceful settlement of the Afghan war. Apart from IS, all sides have expressed their desire for peace talks, so an inclusive framework can be sought to at least open the prospect of such talks. If a peace process involving all sides comes about, the regional players could also realize that a peaceful and neutral Afghanistan is in the best interest of all. The rise of IS could be viewed as a blessing in disguise, as Afghanistan is in a better place than in a long time regarding a consensus on the importance of peace. It would be far-fetched to think that peace can be achieved soon, but one thing is quite obvious: the prospects of multilateral and comprehensive peace talks are much better than in the previous years. As stated above, a combined effort to initiate a comprehensive peace strategy could be the first ray of hope at the end of this long tunnel.

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PRIF SPOTLIGHT

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