

# Afghanistan: US-Taliban Peace Talks: CPEC Perspective

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**Abstract:** The US policy makers attempted the political settlement of the Afghan conflict for the first time in 2011. This study finds the US policy shift in 2017 along with the strain of the conflict on the US economy, rise of ISKP and the war fatigue among the Taliban fighters have enabled the success of US Taliban negotiations. Now that a tentative Peace Agreement has been signed between the two parties, a more complex phase of intra Afghan dialogue has begun. USA, China and Pakistan have extended their support for all Afghan stakeholders to engage in a meaningful dialogue for a political settlement of the conflict. Both China and Pakistan desire the

extension of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan. The paper analyzed the Afghan Peace Talks with reference to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. The motivation and incentives for CPEC incase of successful peace negotiations are be discussed in detail .

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## 1. Introduction

Afghanistan is referred to as the graveyard of empires. World powers have a history of trying to invade the region but without any success. From the Macedonian conqueror Alexander to the British Empire in the nineteenth century to the Soviets in the 1980s to finally the Americans in 2001, no outside intervention has ever succeeded

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in Afghanistan. The unique geopolitical positioning of the country has rendered it a “playground of empires”. The Great Game between the Soviets and the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and then the rivalry between the superpowers USA and USSR and once again the ambitions of USA made it a host for the invading forces. Though each time the invaders had to swallow the tough pills of defeat. In modern history three times the world powers tried to assume control over Afghanistan and failed miserably (Norland, 2017). Afghanistan links Central Asia to Middle East and South and Southeast Asia. This strategic linkage served as a primary motivation for invading foreign powers in order to advance their own political agenda. The British remained active in the country from 1839 to 1919, three wars were fought though in the end the British suffered major loss of human lives along with lack of resources to pursue their campaign in the aftermath of first world war forced them to abandon their ambitions in Afghanistan. The Soviets, on the other hand, desired to bring Afghanistan under their influence, however the Jihadists with their guerilla warfare and strategic, logistic and financial help from USA triumphed and the USSR not only suffered defeat but also disintegrated. Then the first-ever war of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the US-led War on Terror. This war has cost USA trillions of dollars and is also called America’s longest war pushing behind the Vietnam War. Currently the Trump administration is engaged in talks with the Taliban to finally bring an end to this misadventure and cease the constant embarrassment. The reasons behind the inability of foreign powers in maintaining control over the country range from the extremely challenging terrain of the region to the other foreign players who play their own agendas for the country. The mountainous terrain makes the navigation and the movement of personnel and equipment a constant hurdle. This kind of geography is favorable for the guerilla’s forces that are familiar with the region and understand its geography while the security forces equipped with modern and advanced weaponry and technology struggle for their survival. Another factor ignored is the complex tribal system and the diverse ethnic groups with their complicated relations among each other and its impact and how its lack of understanding affects the foreign forces (Little, 2017). This paper is divided into three parts, the first part will particularly focus on the current scenario and analyze the resurgence of the Taliban, and the presence of Islamic State Khorasan Province. The second part will focus on the need to end this war and the role peace talks in reaching a peace settlement. The third part will address the Afghan peace talks and their relevance for the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. Looking into the Afghan war from the perspective of CPEC is crucial since it will provide a unique outlook into the entire conflict and how to resolve it.

## **2. USA-Taliban peace talks**

### **2.1. Taliban in Power**

The literal meaning of the word Taliban is “seeker of knowledge”, the term *Talib* is generally referred to a “*Madrassah* Student”. The second meaning has its roots in the

background of Mullah Omar the group's founder and leader who studied at a *Madrassah* in Pakistan. It is necessary to differentiate between the mujahedeen of the Soviet war from the Taliban. Though a number of Taliban were mujahedeen and fought against the Soviets, this group in their goal and characteristics is different from the jihadists and mujahedeen. Along with Afghans citizens of other Muslim nations took part in the Afghan war and became mujahedeen. The original Taliban, in fact, was made up of the Pashto speaking faction of the mujahedeen (Nojumi, 2009).

After the fall of Kabul, a Civil War among the various mujahedeen groups erupted. The Civil War continued however in 1994 Taliban entered into the fight and at first controlled Kandahar and manage to control Kabul in 1996 ending the four-year civil war. Former President Najibullah was hanged and Osama Bin Laden returned to Afghanistan during this time. Taliban controlled ninety percent of the entire country and managed to eliminate and weaken most of their opposition (Bajoria, 2011). Though predominantly *Pakhtun Taliban's* were an inclusive group where all ethnicities were allowed to fight and the common thread that tied the organization together was its Islamic ideology. The public opinion on the Taliban regime was quite positive since the public was left frustrated and devastated by the Soviet War and then the civil war among the Warlords. Corruption in the government ranks and instability was evident (Khan & Khalid, 2018). The Taliban believed that in order to maintain a stable Afghan state all the armed factions need be disarmed. They faced administrative and financial troubles however they had managed to resume complete monopoly over the use of power.

## **2.2. Taliban versus US interests**

The US intervention in Afghanistan was the result of the Taliban's provision of safe haven to Al Qaeda. Afghan Taliban only operate within the territory of Afghanistan.

## **2.3. 9/11 Attacks and the role of Taliban**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is known as the American Century and the first war of this century is the US-led War on Terror. The attack on world trade center formed the basis of the "War on Terror" and brought Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism as the main foes of humanity for the next decade. The mastermind of the 9/11 attacks was Osama Bin Laden, most well-known mujahed of the Afghan war. During the Soviet War Bin Laden and other Mujahedeen were supported financially and logistically by the USA and West. Though after the Soviet withdrawal Bin Laden left Afghanistan and returned to Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden's reputation as a hero in the Islamic world made him a threat to the Saudi royal family (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016). Bin Laden actively preached against the US presence in Muslim countries. After expulsion from Saudi Arabia Bin Laden took asylum in Afghanistan. In 1998, US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, Dar us Salam and Tanzania were simultaneously bombed by Al-Qaida and as a result 224 people lost their

lives. In response to this US conducted cruise missile strikes in Afghanistan at possible Bin Laden hideouts (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016).

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, nineteen terrorists hijacked four East Coast flights. A total of 2,977 people were killed in the entire operation (History Channel, 2019). On September 20<sup>th</sup> President Bush made a speech in Congress and declared “Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated” (History Channel, 2018).

On September 25<sup>th</sup>, the ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ was announced by the US defense secretary. Evidence gathered by the US evicted Al Qaeda of the attack and the US demanded his handover from the Taliban regime. Initially Taliban leader Mullah Omar rejected any demands of handing over Bin Laden however after the airstrikes began the Taliban offered to hand over Bin Laden to a third neutral country if US provided evidence. The US administration rejected any negotiations or compromise in their demand of handing over Osama Bin Laden, his companions and any hostages they hold over. It was reiterated that the airstrikes will not cease until the demands were met (The Guardian, 2001).

Taliban explicitly had no role in 9/11 moreover Afghanistan was among the first countries to condemn the attack, their only fault was allowing safe haven to Bin Laden and his cohorts. Taliban suggested various methods to resolve the issue, one of the proposals was to try Bin Laden at a three-nation court under the supervision of Organization of Islamic Conference. USA at that time had not recognized the Taliban regime, no diplomatic ties existed between the two and hence Taliban opined that no extradition agreement existed between US and Afghanistan. The US did not trust the Taliban regime and considered it a ploy (Mashal, 2011). Taliban’s persistent support to the terrorist group had cost them their ties with Saudi Arabia one of the only three countries that had diplomatic ties with the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan. Furthermore certain Taliban factions were irritated by Bin Laden’s continued declarations and actions against the US namely the 1998 embassy attacks (Bacon, 2018).

#### **2.4. US attacks Afghanistan**

US’s military campaign in Afghanistan was known as ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’. Prior to the beginning of the military exercise extradition of Bin Laden and his companions was demanded by the Bush administrations and severe consequences were threatened in case the Taliban failed to comply (Hassan, 2017) Bush administration aimed to not only capture Bin Laden but install a government that would be friendly to the US and refrains from harboring any terrorists on its soil (Katzman, 2017).

By October 2001 around 1000 marines were deployed in Qandahar, Taliban administration was unable to sustain their control under such conditions, in December 2001

Northern Alliance forces captured Kabul and the Taliban regime officially lost control over Afghanistan. Mullah Omar who stayed in Qandahar throughout his career as the supreme leader fled the city after Kabul fell. The overarching goal throughout the campaign remained of capturing Bin Laden (CFR, 2016). By 2003 the Bush administration had declared an end to the combat mission in Afghanistan and announced that the focus would be on nation-building. According to President Bush it was "mission accomplished" in Afghanistan. Now the allies focused on stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan (Khan, 2019).

At this point around 8,000 US soldiers were present in Afghanistan. By this time the Bush administration's focus had shifted from Afghanistan to the Iraq war. For the Americans the combat part of the war was over and Afghanistan no longer became the priority agenda for the US administration. Taliban re-organized and made a comeback in 2006. A new wave of insurgency-hit the Southern regions of Afghanistan. There were 136 suicide attacks in 2006 while the figure was only 27 in the previous year. Following the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001 there was a respite in violence, US and international forces failed to take advantage of the situation, as a result, the insurgents reassembled and began operations in east and south of Afghanistan. Armed attacks went from 1,558 in 2005 to 4,542 in 2006. By 2009, President Barack Obama was elected to the office and he pledged seventeen thousand more troops to Afghanistan. By this time the total number of troops deployed in the country reached thirty seven thousand. The focus remained on quelling the resurgence in violence. In 2010 NATO members decided on a timetable to handover the security control to the Afghan forces set to begin in 2011 with complete withdrawal in 2014 (Malik, 2018).

In 2011 Osama Bin Laden was finally killed in an operation carried out by the US forces in Pakistan's city of Abbottabad. The main aim of invading Afghanistan had been accomplished. The number of US troops in Afghanistan gradually lowered and the transition phase began. During 2014 ISAF handed over the control of around 800 bases to Afghan security forces along with the control of 'Provincial Reconstruction Forces'. In 2015, only 9,800 troops remained in Afghanistan and the 'Operation Enduring Freedom' concluded and 'Operation Resolute Support' (ORS) began. In 2016 the number of US forces fell to around 8,000 instead of 6,000 as planned earlier due to security situation. The Afghan administration had concerns about the post-withdrawal scenario and their consequences which would be discussed below in the paper. Though President Trump increased the number of forces for Resolute Support Mission and by November 2017 they reached up to 15,000. The Trump administration developed a new strategy that focused more on situation approach rather than following a timetable. The current focus is on increasing the offensive against Taliban along with engaging in a meaningful dialogue that would end America's longest war (Katzman, 2017).

## **2.5. An endless protracted war**

The war in Afghanistan has failed to yield the intended results for the US. Americans miscalculated the situation entirely and as early as 2003 claimed that the combat phase of the operation has ended. The complex ground realities hit them with realization in 2006 when the Taliban resurged with more vigor and violence. The war has entered in eighteenth year and besides the peace talks there seems no hope of ending insurgency and reaching a peaceful settlement. Afghanistan paid the price of this shortsighted misadventure with loss of lives, infrastructure and stability. The United States and its allies suffered a great deal as well. Afghanistan intervention is a constant thorn in the foreign policy of USA, while NATO countries officially ended their combat missions in 2015; the Americans cannot wipe their hands that easily of the mess in Afghanistan. Complete withdrawal without a peace deal would not only destabilize the entire region it would also be a massive embarrassment for the superpower. Yet after spending \$975 billion, the peace settlement is nowhere in sight (Amadeo, 2019).

Ever since the combat mission ended in Afghanistan security situation is getting worse with an unprecedented increase in the insurgency. In a study conducted by the BBC, 66% of the country has active Taliban presence. While 4% is in full control of the Taliban, only 30% is in full control of the government (Sharifi & Adamou, 2018). According to US watchdog the number of personnel in Afghanistan Security Forces, which includes the army, air force, and police all have fallen by 10% from 331,708 in previous year to 296,409 by the beginning of 2018 (McCarthy 2018). Afghan government's control has subsequently declined since 2015. US believes that international coalition pulled their forces out way too quickly, leaving a vacuum that provided insurgents with a breathing space. US General Mattis says that such a rapid withdraw of forces is partially responsible for increased insurgency. However, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg disagrees since he believes that NATO should have transitioned from combat to assisting and training role much sooner, training and enabling Afghan Forces is more sustainable than relying on international forces in order to fight insurgents (Brooke-Hollande, 2018).

Moreover Taliban have appointed shadow governors over 32 of the total 34 provinces. The local grievances against the existing political system, corruption and the desire for stability have generated a much favorable view of the Taliban. Moreover the opium production has increased since the US intervention. In 2008 Afghanistan's share in the global opium production was ninety-two percent. The Afghan conflict is irrevocably linked to the peace of the entire region. Continued instability would disturb the balance in the region but USA is caught in a quagmire, where it cannot bear the cost of staying in Afghanistan indefinitely and leaving without a peace deal would create a vacuum and plunge the entire region towards instability (Qazi, 2011).

## **2.6. Peace talks: need of the day**

Currently, the war in Afghanistan is in a stalemate situation where neither the allies are able to maintain stability and eliminate the insurgency nor the Taliban are able to take control of Kabul. Hence the war is stuck in a limbo where neither side can claim victory. In this kind of uncertain situation another actor has risen in Afghanistan that is a rival to both US forces and the Taliban the Islamic State Khorasan Province. ISKP is a sub-group of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, while ISIS lost its caliphate in Iraq, its foothold is increasing in Afghanistan. It is perceived as a much bigger threat than the Taliban since the basic ideology of both organizations is different. Taliban are made up of local individuals whose aim is to fight the foreign forces while ISKP is more global in reach, their agenda is to formulate a caliphate in the Islamic world that transcends boundaries while the Taliban are only focused on Afghanistan. Moreover the ISKP has shown no reluctance in spilling civilian blood (Aljazeera, 2019). The Afghan officials initially denounced the presence of ISKP though a number of events forced them to modify their stand. The emergence of propaganda videos, distribution of pro-IS pamphlets and the pro-IS graffiti at the Kabul University affirms the existence of the group. Since 2016 to 2018, around 2,000 civilians have been killed in the violence generated by the ISKP. Their main tactic has remained suicide bombing and in 2017 they caused 22 percent of civilian deaths. In 2015 the ISIS spokesperson officially announced the group's outreach to Afghanistan as part of the Khorasan province that incorporates Pakistan and Central Asia as well. Taliban were quick to condemn the group and violent clashes between the two have been frequent. A number of Taliban fighters and commanders defected to the ISKP due to internal rifts (Khan, 2019). Both rivals clashed in Kunar, Farah, Nangarhar, Helmand, and Kunduz from 2014 till the spring of 2015 and both sides suffered heavy losses. These instances make it apparent that ISKP is now a new force in the Afghan conflict. The battle for resources and territorial control continued though Taliban managed to clear ISKP from Farah and besides Nangarhar ISKP struggled to maintain its control. Though they almost managed to take Tora Bora from the Taliban. The intense fighting between the two groups is ongoing, even after the fall of ISIS caliphate in 2018. Some districts of Jowzjan region are still under the control of ISKP; this unprecedented rise shows will have a spillover effect for the entire neighborhood including Pakistan, India, Iran Central Asia China and Russia (Ramachandran, 2018). The ideology of Islamic states revolves around establishing a global Caliphate hence threatening the entire region. The threat posed to not only Afghanistan but the entire region has forced several regional countries to reconsider their positions in regards to the Taliban. These countries include Iran and Russia who have come to a realization that the threat of ISKP is much bigger than the Taliban who only aspire to consolidate the power in Afghanistan. These countries have put efforts to enable a favorable environment for peace negotiations between Taliban

and the US. Perhaps the presence of ISKP has forced all stakeholders to speed up the peace process and view Taliban as a legitimate party to Afghan conflict and crucial to counter the threat of ISKP (Khan, 2019).

Many attempts had been made to carry out direct talks with the Taliban, initially in 2013 during the Obama administration though the process derailed soon after Hamid Karzai refused to accept it. The Trump administration seems more adamant to carry out direct talks and broker a peace deal. The USA traditionally considered Afghan government essential to the Afghan peace process Trump administration with its direct talks has reversed this policy. Former US Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad was appointed as the Special Representative for the Afghan Reconciliation. Numerous meetings have been conducted between Taliban representatives and Khalilzad in Doha and Qatar. He carried out meetings with Pakistani officials as well. Negotiations carried out through 2019 and in March Khalilzad declared that an agreement had been reached on counter-terrorism and troop withdrawal. After the agreement the next phase is the intra Afghanistan dialogue (Thomas, 2020). In 2020 a massive breakthrough was achieved and the an agreement facilitating the intra Afghan dialogue was signed. The next would examine the previous efforts made for political settlement along with the US Taliban agreement.

### **3. Previous attempts at negotiations**

#### ***3.1. Initiative by the Obama administration***

In 2010 the Afghan government established the High Peace Council with a goal of moving towards a political reconciliation among all Afghan factions. The conclusion of the conflict in Afghanistan through negotiations and dialogue was the stated goal of the newly created body. In 2011, the Obama administration declared US intentions towards diplomatic engagement with the Taliban for a political settlement of the Afghan war. In 2013, Taliban established their political office in Doha to formalize the dialogue process (Miller & Blake, 2019). The informal contacts between US officials and Taliban representatives began in November 2010 with the aid of Germany in Munich. The second meeting took place in February 2011 in Doha. The aim was to discuss a prisoner exchange between the two parties. In May that year another engagement between the officials from both sides took place. In January 2012 the two sides met again amid a possibility of prisoner exchange as a confidence building measure. However this round of talks fell apart as both sides had divergent position. The US desired the Taliban prisoners to be released from Guantanamo bay to remain in Qatar, the Taliban disagreed and the talks failed (Shiekh & Greenwood, 2018). In 2013, the US once again albeit tentatively attempted negotiations with the Taliban. For the first time ever the Taliban opened their political office in Qatar. A permanent Taliban office in Qatar would serve as a base for negotiations. However a controversy generated when the Taliban displayed fight flag

on their office and referred to Afghanistan as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This angered the Karzai administration and effectively ended this round of dialogue before it even began (Roberts, 2013).

### ***3.2. A brief overview of the Intra-Afghan dialogue***

The talks to initiate an intra afghan dialogue began in the early years Hamid Karzai's presidency. He laid the foundation of a framework called Programme Tehkim- e-Solh. The Taliban commander in the Paktika province announced his allegiance to the new government and constitution along with twelve other Taliban loyalists. The program aimed at mainstreaming the Taliban into the Afghan politics and motivating them to renounce violent practices. The program however failed owing to the corruption among the ranks of its management. The biggest cause of the failure was the lack of political will and political support for the program.

In 2010 the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Programme (APRP) was established supervised by the High Peace Council. The leader of the High Peace Council was Burhanuddin Rabbani who led the Northern Alliance considered the arch enemy of the Taliban. The programme despite this managed to create contacts with mid level leadership of the Taliban. In 2011 however Rabbani was assassinated and the talks were suspended (Rubin, 2011).

#### *Peace process roadmap 2015*

In 2012, a proposal titled as the Peace Process Roadmap 2015 was presented by the Afghan High Peace Council during Pakistan Afghan bilateral meeting. The draft included proposal for addition of Taliban leadership in the national cabinet along with governorship of some provinces. Pakistan was appointed to play the role of facilitator however the proposal never materialized (Shiekh & Greenwood, 2018).

### ***3.3. The Trump administration***

President Trump in 2017 announced the strategy to conclude the Afghan war. The military campaign against insurgency went hand in hand with the political reconciliation. Though there was no clarity on how a political settlement will be achieved. In 2018, the longstanding US position that claimed the peace process to be "Afghan led, Afghan owned" was reversed. The US for the first time entered into talks with the Taliban leaders in Qatar without any input or representation from the Afghan government. This seismic policy shift can be attributed as the foundation for the current US Taliban peace framework. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad held meetings with Taliban leadership throughout the 2018 and 2019 (Thomas, 2020). He also met with officials from Pakistan and other neighboring countries. The negotiations centered

around two main points:

- The status of foreign forces in Afghanistan
- The prevention of international terrorist organizations from functioning in Afghanistan.

By August 2019 it was estimated that a draft outlining the peace agreement has been finalized however in September President Trump unilaterally called of the talks. He cited the insurgent attack in the Afghan capital that killed a US soldier. Despite the massive blow the Taliban invited the US to participate in negotiations once again (BBC, 2019). Over the next month unofficial talks resumed. On December 4<sup>th</sup> Zalmay Khalilzad officially joined the negotiations.

#### *Prelude to the peace agreement*

The draft of the peace agreement was fully flashed out and prepared. To reduce violence and assess the seriousness of the Taliban leadership a truce for a weeklong ceasefire was finalized. The intent was to determine not only Taliban intentions but also their control over their forces . the truce was implemented in February 22<sup>nd</sup>. According to the US officials the attacks and violence went down by eighty percent during the truce (Quilty, 2020)

#### **3.4. The peace agreement**

On February 29, the Peace Agreement was signed between the US and Taliban in Qatar witnessed by the US Sectary of State Mike Pompeo and delegates from neighboring countries including Pakistan. In Kabul the same day, US Defense Secretary and the Afghan President issued a joint declaration that affirmed the US support for the Afghan government and the Afghan government's willingness to hold talks with the Taliban (Thomas, 2020). The main features of the agreement include:

- US commitment to withdraw its five thousand of its troops within 135 days
- Withdrawal of all US forces within fourteen months
- Prisoner exchange between the Afghan government and the Taliban
- Removal of international sanctions on Taliban leadership by 27<sup>th</sup> August 2020 conditioned to the start of intra Afghan dialogue
- The Taliban must prevent Al Qaeda or other terrorist organizations from operating inside the Afghan territory against the US or its allies.

The agreement also lays down the timeline of the prisoner exchange and the beginning of the intra Afghan dialogue by March 10<sup>th</sup> 2020 (Graham-Harrison, Sabbagh, Makoi & Borger, 2020).

#### **4. Hurdles in the way of the path of Intra-Afghan Dialogue**

Talks with Taliban has always been a complex process in the US war on Terror strategy in Afghanistan and beyond. Now that an agreement between US and Taliban has been signed underlining the framework for intra Afghan dialogue, the political differences among various Afghan stakeholders pose a major challenge. The most important factor that may impact the outcome of Afghan national dialogue lies in the fact that all Afghan actors have different interests while engaging in negotiations.

However, now that a framework for peace has been achieved, it's crucial that all conditions laid down in the agreement are fulfilled. According to US Defense Secretary Mike Espen the troop withdrawal is contingent to the beginning of the intra Afghan dialogue and a sustained reduction in violence. The agreement can be called off by Washington if the agreed upon conditions are not fulfilled by the Taliban (Seligman, 2020). Hence the agreement between the Taliban and the US is only the first step, the main task would be the intra Afghan dialogue and a consensus on power sharing formula between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

##### **4.1. The political fragmentation in Afghanistan**

Afghanistan is a blend of a number of various ethnicities including Pushtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and many others. This kind of fragmentation in a society is a major hurdle when it comes to any settlement. Within the current government, the fragmentation is becoming more and more prominent. The Taliban, allied forces and even ISKP could not unite the current political stakeholders. In 2017, senior government officials formed a new coalition consisting of Uzbek-majority Junbish-e-Milli party; the Tajik Jamaat-e-Islami party and the Hazara Hizb-e-Wahdat-e-Islami party. Their demands included a decentralized decision-making process and political reforms. The timing of this coalition can serve as a major blow to the government that is struggling to maintain its relevance in the current scenario (Katzman, 2017).

The Pashtun dominated Taliban are opposed by the Northern Alliance and the existing political structure of Afghanistan. There were some talks of the interim government which would facilitate the reentry of Taliban into the political life. This notion was completely rejected by the Afghan president who believes that any peace deal without the Afghan government onboard would prove suicidal (Thomas, 2020). Though the peace agreement has laid down the foundation of talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, there are major hurdles that could complicate the process or even derail the entire agreement. The biggest of the lot is the political dispute between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. The presidential elections held on September 2019 have shattered any hopes of convergence among the Afghan political elites in Kabul. On February 18, 2020 both Ghani and Abdullah took oath as the president of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The country now has two presidents, though the US and international

community by large acknowledges Ghani as the head of the state. The two political leaders have disagreements on dealings with the Taliban as well. This uncertainty puts the Afghan government at an ever weaker position (Kumar, 2020). The fragile political system indicates the complicated situation in Afghanistan amid US efforts to ensure a political settlement. Though the Afghan government officials have made it clear that US troop withdrawal without taking Kabul's input and inclusion would render the results similar to the nineties Civil War. Washington also realizes the extent of instability in case the foreign forces leave without an intra Afghan dialogue and an agreed upon power sharing formula between all fractions (Alikozai & Habibzada, 2019).

#### ***4.2. Disagreement on the prisoner exchange***

In the agreement a proper timeline was devised for the prisoner exchange between the Afghan government and the Taliban. This became the first roadblock on route to a national all inclusive dialogue for political settlement. The agreement signed between the US Taliban explicitly states that the Afghan government would release five thousand Taliban prisoners imprisoned in the Afghan jails while the Taliban will free one thousand of the Afghan prisoners by March 10<sup>th</sup> 2020. After the signing of the peace agreement the Afghan government was anticipated to announce the release of Taliban prisoners. The government however refused, as a result the intra Afghan dialogue that was suppose to begin by March 10<sup>th</sup> never started. The joint statement by the Afghan government and the US does not acknowledge the figure of five thousand prisoners let alone the deadline mentioned in the agreement. The understanding between the US and Afghan government was that US will play the role of a facilitator between the two parties regarding the exchange of a significant number of prisoners on both sides (Bezhan, 2020). President Ghani's refusal created a deadlock among the US and the Afghan government. on March 11<sup>th</sup> President Ashraf signed announced that fifteen hundred prisoners would be freed in the next fifteen days only if they provide written agreement that they would not participate in the violent Taliban campaign. If the Taliban continued their commitment to reduced violence only than other prisoners will be released. This proposal though initially rejected by the Taliban have been begrudgingly accepted after US Secretary of State's intervention. According to Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad a meeting via Skype was held between the Afghan government officials and Taliban regarding prisoner exchange on March 25<sup>th</sup>. Both sides have affirmed that the exchange would began by March 31<sup>st</sup> (Hadid, 2020)

The impasse between the two sides raised fears that the agreement might disrupt. The US announced the suspension of \$ billion aid to Afghanistan. This prompted action from the Ghani administration and on March 26<sup>th</sup> a high level twenty one member delegate was announced to hold negotiations with the Taliban. The delegate would be headed by the former chief of the National Directorate of Security to President Ghani (AlJazeera, 2020). Though Abdullah Abdullah's input in this latest development is yet unknown.

Moreover the Taliban and the Afghan government have also made small progress regarding prisoner release. The Taliban delegate would visit Kabul and provide the lists of the Taliban prisoners however the number of prisoners released is unknown.

### ***4.3. Resumption of Violence***

The breakdown of ceasefire is a major irritant in the path of intra Afghan dialogue. Since the US Taliban agreement was signed, optimists speculated that Taliban might put an end to violence. According to the reports by the Afghan and US officials, seventy six attacks had been carried out within the four days of signing the peace agreement. Forty three attacks on the Afghan security forces were conducted in Helmand in a single day. As a response, US carried out airstrikes on the Taliban hideouts. Taliban and the US, despite the violence carried out against the Afghan security forces expect that the peace agreement will be upheld as no provision of the agreement conditions Taliban to refrain from attacking the Afghan security forces. This can simply be viewed as a tactic to pressure the Afghan government during potential intra Afghan negotiations (Thomson, 2020).

### ***4.4. Role of regional countries to support different parties or the role of external forces***

Afghanistan has a geostrategic location that can be a curse and a blessing. So far Afghanistan existence in the world map has proved to be a curse. A number of regional and extra-regional actors intend to utilize and manipulate the situation in Afghanistan in their favor. Pakistan has long been accused of harboring the Haqqani network and sponsoring the Taliban. Moreover India has also played a gamble in the country by making massive infrastructure investments and developing cordial ties with the current government. Pakistan had remained a supporter of peace talks and Taliban has exerted pressure in bringing them to the negotiation table. Moreover according to US officials the Russians and Iranians have also grown adamant in their support if Taliban. Both these countries opposed the Taliban government but the emergence of ISKP and their global jihadist agenda has forced the regional powers to reconsider Taliban as viable force to bring stability in the country (Thomas, 2020).

Recently, Russia hosted a multilateral peace conference called Moscow Peace Talks in November 2018. This was the first-ever multilateral conference attended by the Taliban, delegates from Pakistan, India, China, and even the Afghan government took part. The Russians intended to develop an atmosphere of goodwill between Kabul and Taliban, though the conference ended without any breakthrough due to Taliban's policy stand against Kabul. Pakistan welcomed the gesture by the regional countries. This suggests that the regional and sub-regional powers want to settle the issue alongside USA (Roth, 2018). The international community by large has supported the peace

agreement between the Taliban and the US. Particularly Pakistan, as a sustained political settlement in Afghanistan would have positive impact on Pakistan's internal security situation.

## **5. USA-Taliban peace talks-CPEC perspective**

CPEC has no direct connections with US dialogue with Taliban in Afghanistan but it's a double criteria for the talks as on the one hand it took initiative to start talks with these forces but on the other hand they are in mood to encourage dialogue with Taliban in Pakistan. CPEC being the project of BRI also encouraging peaceful environment for making the project successful.

### ***5.1. CPEC as a regional economic integration***

South Asia is considered to be one of the least integrated regions in the world with high unexploited economic prospects. Afghanistan is now considered at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia hence its can serve as a bridge between the two regions. South Asian countries share common history and heritage but political differences have proved a major hurdle in terms of economic connectivity and cooperation. The benefits of economic cooperation are usually ignored in most of the regional countries including Pakistan and Afghanistan. The political situation and the presence of conflict have rendered the region with low levels of regional integration. South Asia is the fastest-growing region of the world owing to India's emerging economy. It has the potential to become the second-largest economy in the world if its member states develop an integrated economy. A huge opportunity for the regional countries in this regard is the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. Economic corridors play a vital role in boosting economic efficiency and strengthening regional cooperation. Furthermore these corridors improve infrastructure and regional connectivity, there is direct relationship between regional corridors and increased trade and regional development (Srivastava, 2011). The main purpose of economic corridors is to stimulate trade and improve circumstances so that regional cooperation and development can occur (Petrella, 2018). They increase economic activities along major infrastructures such as roads and rails. Economic growth, infrastructural development, telecommunication cables, pipelines, and tourism is enhanced along the corridor. Along with economic outcomes efforts are made to concentrate on social and other impacts of the corridor as well. In the context of South Asia, economic corridors would augment connectivity across the region, improve global trade and speed up the process of regional integration.

CPEC has become a centerpiece of economic activity in the region. It's the framework through which regional states can boost connectivity and integration. If used properly it can serve as a model for economic growth in the region. Its benefits are not only limited to China and Pakistan but the whole region can benefit from it (Butt & Butt, 2015).

The potential to enhance economic integration between South Asian states as well improve economic cooperation among the regions of Central Asia, Middle East and East Asia. Inclusion of major regional actors, namely Afghanistan, India and Iran, are vital for enhanced economic connectivity (Ali, 2015). As many as 52 countries have shown interest in the project, the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has already expressed willingness to join CPEC and improve cooperation especially in sectors of energy.



Figure 1

### 5.2. CPEC and Prosperity in Afghanistan

The relation between CPEC and Afghanistan is reciprocal. If CPEC is successfully implemented in Afghanistan it would not only benefit Afghanistan but also the true potential of CPEC as a connectivity tool would be realized. Instability in Afghanistan would result in uncertainty for foreign investors investing in CPEC. Afghanistan's GDP is mere \$22 billion and per capita income is \$600 (Awan, 2018). Moreover the security situation of Pakistan is very closely linked with that of Afghanistan, instability could trigger a spillover effect threatening not only CPEC but the very stability of Pakistan. Afghanistan, on the other hand, needs venues that can develop its economy, bring livelihood and develop infrastructure. CPEC is the perfect opportunity to achieve these goals. The current negotiations if successful would at least bring stability though after continuous instability and insurgency the economic uplift would become necessary to maintain that stability. China has already extended invitation to Afghanistan. Since including Afghanistan is necessary for complete regional connectivity. Along with connectivity and infrastructure Afghanistan would be able to shun its overdependence on foreign aid. It is estimated that CPEC would create job opportunities and thus uplift the economy. Moreover politically Afghanistan's bilateral ties with

Pakistan and China would improve. Afghanistan is a landlocked country, combined with the conflict its venues for economic uplift are minimum. The infrastructure, connectivity and industrial set up are nonexistent. CPEC thrives on connectivity and building infrastructure. Investments carried out under CPEC could include a railway track between Torkham and Jalalabad, development of copper mines in Afghanistan, Peshawar to Kabul Motorway (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). Two highway tracks connecting Dera Ismail Khan to Angoor Adda and Ghulam Khan in the Afghanistan are undergoing construction. These tracks would connect the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan to the Paktika and Khost provinces of Afghanistan. The direct link would serve as an opportunity for local Afghan businesses to communicate directly with their market base in Pakistan (Khan, 2018).

Moreover, the potential of hydroelectricity is abundant which the foreign investors can exploit. The Badakhshan province is abundant in untapped minerals such as Azure, Gold, Ruby, and Copper mines. China and Pakistan can help Afghanistan in capitalizing on these resources. Construction of the Lowari tunnel at the Wakhan corridor would facilitate in a route connecting Pakistan to Central Asia via Afghanistan. All the transit movement with CARs would pass through Afghanistan. Moreover CPEC could serve as a Confidence Building Measure and it can pave the way for work on TAPI. TAPI was a gas pipeline agreement signed between Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India in 2015. Unfortunately due to the political clout and distrust this project could not be completed (Ali, 2015).

Afghanistan is abundant in natural resources while the lack of infrastructure, political stability and continued conflict renders it difficult to tap into those resources. China has shown an interest in Afghanistan resource havens. Extension of CPEC would grant Beijing access to those natural resources while Afghanistan would benefit with infrastructure projects, land access to Gwadar and serve as connection between China and Central Asia. This engagement would be mutually beneficial to all parties involved. Seventy percent of Afghanistan's products are imported by Islamabad and New Delhi, in case of regional connectivity its untapped copper and iron would find a market in China and Central Asia. Kabul's advantages for joining CPEC are twofold, first can access to large markets such as Central Asia, China along with export of its natural resources and secondly the infrastructural development in Afghanistan that would uplift the Afghan economy (Khan, 2018).

### ***5.3. Successful Taliban talks and its positive impacts on CPEC***

CPEC and Afghanistan have a reciprocal impact on each other. The successful peace agreement between the stakeholders would ensure stability in Afghanistan which as discussed earlier would have a direct impact on Pakistan. Moreover the success of CPEC depends on peaceful and business-friendly environment. To carry out any economic

activity stability plays a vital role. Unstable Afghanistan would ultimately have a spillover effect and could potentially destabilize Pakistan in particular Balochistan and former FATA. To ensure the smooth working of this billion-dollar project Pakistan and China both are keen to play their role in enabling a stabilized and peaceful Afghanistan. The connectivity between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East is only possible if Afghanistan is involved. The existence of a prosperous Afghanistan would benefit the entire region not only politically but economically as well. Afghanistan's stability is one of the major challenges faced by the project.

Pakistan can reap huge benefits in case of connectivity between the two countries. Militancy, cross border terrorism would be addressed as both neighbors would be interdependent on each other for economic development. Local businesses on both sides would foster. Economic stability and security situation both go hand in hand. As a result of political stability, reduction in violence and improved security situation Kabul would be included in CPEC. Inclusion in the corridor would improve economic situation in Afghanistan and breathe life into Afghan economy hence contributing in the stability of the country along with improvements in the security situation as the Afghan youth would benefit from the employment opportunities generated by CPEC. The overall improvement in the security situation and economic benefits of Afghanistan inclusion into CPEC are the main drivers of Pakistan's proactive and positive role in US Taliban peace negotiations. The country moreover affirmed her support for the intra Afghan dialogue and reiterated the need of a successful peace settlement between all factions in Afghanistan.

China played a positive role in encouraging dialogue between Taliban and US. In recent years China has played a subtle yet effective role in Kabul. There is a realization among both Islamabad and Beijing that a stabilized Afghanistan in terms of security, politics and economy would result in a stable South Asia. Only a stable Afghanistan can connect China to Central Asia and trade its valuable natural resources. To ensure a stable and conflict free Afghanistan negotiations and political settlement between all Afghan stakeholders and Taliban is the most critical step. A sustained ceasefire and stability are the only route available for a stable Pakistan and successful CPEC. This convergence of goals is the primary motivations behind Pakistan and China's active role in a successful negotiations and peaceful settlement of the longest US war.

## **6. Conclusion**

The US war on terror policy in Afghanistan entered into another episode post-US/NATO drawdown from Afghanistan that will take the matter to use more technology than the humans and forces. This factor also forces by the change in US administration under Trump leadership as he believes the full pullout from Kabul. The fate of Afghanistan and the entire region is now resting on the outcome of negotiations between Taliban and

the Afghan government. The region's political landscape was altered forever when USA invaded Afghanistan to extradite Osama Bin Laden. After countless lives and billions of dollars lost US has come to a realization that they cannot maintain their control over Afghanistan. Hence the superpower seems in a rush to resolve the issue and end the continuous embarrassment and waste of resources and finances. US policymakers are facing new crises such as rising China, North Korea, Iran crises and the war in Syria. They intend to focus on these contemporary issues and rid themselves of the too-long Afghan war. The regional countries also realize the importance of peace settlement for Afghanistan.

The Taliban, on the other hand, are also suffering from war fatigue. This war has been dragged for too long and the only solution is through dialogue. The initiative of China Pakistan Economic Corridor is a massive opportunity for the entire region. Though in order to make it successful the external challenges to the project must be eliminated. The biggest challenge being the Afghan conflict. Termed as game changer, CPEC needs to fully operationalise in Afghanistan though the current instability is preventing any such ambition. For CPEC to succeed the settlement of Afghan conflict is mandatory. Hence China and Pakistan must put all their energies in ensuring a conducive environment for the ongoing dialogue. Ultimately the peace in Afghanistan along with the extension of CPEC would ensure the prosperity of the entire region.

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