Negotiating Peace: Assessing the Afghan Peace Deal and Regional Dynamics

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The Afghan population has been significantly affected by the consequences of the United States-led invasion, including the ongoing war on terror, economic and political turmoil, and security concerns. Both the United States administration and the Afghan government assert the imperative for Pakistan to exert influence and facilitate the engagement of the Taliban in negotiations. The paper scrutinizes the complexities of the peace negotiations, examining the historical context, implementation challenges, and the involvement of diverse stakeholders in the process. Through an extensive literature review and thematic analysis, the study navigates through scholarly resources, governmental reports, and policy papers to elucidate the multifaceted dimensions of the Afghan Peace Deal. It explores the regional power dynamics, geopolitical interests, and the roles of key stakeholders, elucidating their influence on the negotiation process and subsequent implications for peace and stability within the region. This paper aims to offer a nuanced understanding of the Afghan Peace Deal, its implementation challenges, and the broader regional dynamics, providing valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners invested in peacebuilding efforts in Central and South Asia. Pakistan, a significant ally in the ongoing conflict and a neighboring country of Afghanistan, is experiencing destabilization that has the potential to negatively impact regional stability. This study provides a critical analysis of the United States' grand strategy aimed at achieving peace in Afghanistan. The subject of discussion is the Taliban and the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan, involving the United States and Pakistan.

Keywords: Global Peace, Regional Stability, Afghan Government, Security Concerns.

Introduction:

Afghanistan is a landlocked country situated in the hilly region of North West Pakistan, characterized by its predominantly Muslim population. According to the information provided by Wikipedia, the country in question is characterized by its multi-ethnic composition and had an estimated population of over 38 million individuals in 2019. Notably, this figure encompasses a significant portion of the population, with over two million individuals classified as refugees and residing within the borders of Pakistan [1]. In the wake of the United States-led invasion in 2001, Afghanistan has grappled with multifaceted challenges, from enduring the repercussions of the war on terror to navigating through economic, political, and security crises. Amidst this complex landscape, the pursuit of peace has emerged as a focal point, drawing attention from global stakeholders, including the United States, Afghanistan, and neighboring Pakistan. The urgency to engage the Taliban in negotiations and establish a sustainable peace framework has been emphasized as pivotal not only for Afghanistan's stability but also for global peace dynamics. However, the intricacies of the peace accord and the roles played by involved parties namely, the Taliban, the Afghan government, and the United States have revealed critical deficiencies. The primary ethnic groupings in the region consist of the Pashtuns, comprising approximately 42% of

the population, followed by the Tajiks at around 27%. Additionally, the Uzbeks and Hazarawals each constitute approximately 7% of the total population. The ethnic groups known as Tajiks and Uzbeks predominantly reside in the northern region of Afghanistan, specifically in the Panjsher valley [2]. On the other hand, the Hazarwals primarily inhabit the central parts of the country. This particular ethnic group belongs to the Shia faith and primarily communicates in the Persian language, in contrast to the aforementioned ethnicities who adhere to the Sunni sect and predominantly speak Pashtu [3][4][5][6].

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been characterized by difficulties and challenges since the establishment of Pakistan in 1947. Afghanistan was the sole nation within the United Nations that declined to acknowledge the newly established state [7]. The underlying cause of this tension stems from the complex relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The date of acceptance and online availability of the document is October 23, 2021.

The two entities have a shared border that spans a distance of 2430 kilometers. The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, commonly referred to as the Durand Line, has been a subject of dispute for a significant period of time. In the first instance. During the period of the Afghan War (1838-1842), the British Raj successfully acquired a significant amount of land from Afghanistan [8]. As a result, they established the North West Frontier Province, which currently encompasses a substantial portion of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan. Subsequently, Afghanistan maintained its status as a sovereign country, but under continued British influence until the occurrence of the War of Afghan Independence in 1910. The imperative for a stable Afghanistan has assumed heightened significance for Pakistan in the face of escalating violence within the country and the protracted deadlock characterizing the peace process initiated in September 2020. The potential ramifications of an unraveling Afghanistan loom large for Pakistan, as it could embolden domestic militant groups, particularly the Pakistani Taliban, and precipitate a substantial influx of Afghan refugees. Islamabad's concerted efforts to encourage its Taliban allies in Afghanistan toward a negotiated political settlement underscore the delicate balance it seeks to maintain. The failure of these endeavors not only jeopardizes Pakistan's relations with Washington and Kabul but also underscores the urgency for intensified diplomatic initiatives. With the impending deadline for the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan, Pakistan finds itself compelled to redouble its endeavors to persuade the Taliban to curtail both their military offensives and aspirations for the reinstatement of their particular interpretation of Islamic governance, thereby facilitating the potential success of the peace process. Pakistan's active support for the Afghan peace process aligns with its strategic interests, primarily driven by the prospect of its longstanding Taliban ally attaining international legitimacy and the associated economic assistance through diplomatic negotiations. The Trump administration's pursuit of a political settlement in Afghanistan and the subsequent U.S.-Taliban agreement in February 2020 provided Islamabad with an opportune moment to advocate for its preferred outcome—the inclusion of the Taliban in power-sharing arrangements [9][10][11].

While Washington acknowledged Pakistan's role in facilitating these diplomatic developments, the transition of U.S. leadership under President Joe Biden in January 2021 introduced new complexities. The impasse in the peace talks persisted, with the Taliban relying on violence to fortify their bargaining position, and Kabul displaying reluctance to make substantial concessions. President Biden's announcement in April 2021 to withdraw all U.S. troops by September 11, 2021, irrespective of a political resolution, compressed the timelines for advancing the peace process amid anticipated heightened conflict post-withdrawal. Since the commencement of intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha, Qatar, on September 12, 2020, Pakistan's military leadership and the government led by Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf have consistently underscored the indispensability of a political settlement to terminate the Afghan conflict. Despite pledging support for an Afghan-led peace process and disavowing backing for any specific party to the conflict, the direct presence of the Taliban's prominent military and

political figures on Pakistani soil endows Islamabad with a tangible role and a significant stake in the intra-Afghan dialogue. However, this proximity also contributes to the mistrust of Pakistani intentions within Afghan governing and opposition circles. As the withdrawal of foreign forces unfolds and insurgents intensify their use of force to assert control and implement an Islamic governance system, Islamabad faces renewed pressure from Kabul and Washington to influence the Taliban toward de-escalation, ensuring the continuation of negotiations. Although Pakistan's influence with the insurgents has diminished amid their military gains in Afghanistan, the operational base of the Taliban's leadership council in Pakistani havens retains a pivotal role, despite potential disagreements among Taliban commanders in Afghanistan.

The British implemented a strategic approach known as 'The Great Game' in Afghanistan with the objective of preventing Russian expansion [12]. In 1893, due to diplomatic tensions between Russia and Britain in the region of Herat, located on the Afghan side of the Afghanistan-Russia border, Lord Lansdowne, the British Viceroy during the period of 1888-1894, dispatched Sir Mortimer Durand, his Foreign Secretary, to establish clear demarcation lines for the frontiers of Afghanistan in relation to both Russia and British India. The demarcation of the border between Afghanistan and India, known as the Durand Line, was established through a bilateral agreement between Amir Abdurrahman of Afghanistan (1880-1901) and British India, with the collaborative efforts of survey teams from both nations. The region in question was primarily populated by a distinct ethnic group known as the Pashtuns. The establishment of this border resulted in the division of this population, with approximately 13 million individuals currently residing in Afghanistan and nearly double that number, 25 million, residing in Pakistan [13]. This demographic division occurred following the departure of the British colonial forces, as the territories previously under their control became part of the newly independent nation. The Afghan government does not recognize the legitimacy of the Durand Line, a border established between Afghanistan and Pakistan in 1893. This stance is rooted in the promotion of the idea of Pakhtunistan, which advocates for a unified territory for the Pashtun people [14].

In light of the historical evidence, it might be argued that Afghanistan's position is unsustainable. The demarcation of the border was conducted in accordance with agreements reached between the respective rulers of both regions and its international recognition has been acknowledged. Throughout history, there has generally been a significant degree of acceptability about the transfer of conquered territories between nations [15]. This is notably evident in the case of Afghanistan, where Afghan dynasties have exerted their dominance over India, while the Mughals have governed various regions of Afghanistan for prolonged periods of time. Following the conclusion of the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919, it is noteworthy that Amir Habibullah Khan, during the War of Independence, demonstrated acceptance of the Durand Line [16].

Regrettably, the matter has been portrayed via the lens of ethnic solidarity and attributed to the influence of British colonialists, suggesting that a Pashtun individual should lend their support to it, regardless of its actual significance [17]. Nevertheless, the inquiry pertains to the extent of authentic desire expressed by the Pashtuns. The evidence of its variability undermines the perception of its indispensability. The economic conditions of the Pashtun population in Pakistan, in comparison to those in Afghanistan, have demonstrated a distinct preference among the inhabitants of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Province. In Afghanistan, the proposed establishment of Pakhtunistan, given its multi-ethnic composition, would have significant implications for the demographic makeup of the region. Consequently, this initiative is likely to be met with resistance from groups such as the Tajiks and Uzbeks. This study is rooted in a deep exploration of pivotal questions surrounding the prospects of peace in Afghanistan. Central to this investigation are the primary challenges that could obstruct the successful execution of a peace accord in the region. Delving into these obstacles, the study aims to unearth strategies that might effectively minimize these risks, paving the way for a more viable and sustainable peace framework. Additionally, the research critically examines the role of the Afghan peace process as

a potential avenue for Pakistan's redemption. By drawing information and insights from a spectrum of secondary sources, including reports, scholarly articles, and books, this study amalgamates analytical perspectives with descriptive elements. Through this multifaceted approach, the study endeavors to offer a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in the Afghan peace dynamics and the potential for regional rehabilitation, thereby contributing to the discourse on conflict resolution in this critical geopolitical landscape [18]. Therefore, the utilization of the qualitative technique has been employed to examine the study inquiries.

Role of the Afghan Peace Process in Pakistan's Redemption:

After the partition and the formation of Pakistan, the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has seen a blend of favorable and unfavorable shifts. Notably, a significant turn took place in the early 1950s when the Shah of Iran intervened diplomatically, leading to Afghanistan officially acknowledging Pakistan. This recognition remained intact until 1955 when the idea of a confederation between the two countries surfaced. However, between 1955 and 1957, there was a marked decline in diplomatic ties, culminating in the closure of their respective embassies [19]. The escalation of tensions stemmed primarily from Pakistan's efforts to extend its administrative control over the tribal region, triggering friction in the relationship. Sardar Daud, the former leader of Afghanistan, notably championed the cause of Pakhtunistan, contributing to strained relations during his tenure. Serving as prime minister from 1953 to 1963 under King Zahir Shah's rule, his stance remained consistent. However, when he assumed a different position during Ayub's term in 1963, there was a noticeable improvement in relations. Yet, in 1973, Daud successfully ousted Zahir Shah and held the presidency until 1978, leading to a resurgence of tensions, which endured until at least 1977. Notably, in the current year, Daud severed ties with Russian influence in Afghanistan and shifted his approach toward Pakistan [20]. However, the amicable gestures quickly came to an end as the Saur Revolution, supported by the Soviet Union, ousted and executed Daud Khan and his family in 1978.

Evolution of Afghan-Pakistan Relations Amidst Geopolitical Turmoil: From Soviet Occupation to Taliban Consolidation:

During the consecutive communist administrations, Afghanistan grappled with internal conflicts and political instability. In 1979, the deployment of Russian soldiers aimed to bolster the Soviet-backed regimes. This shift led to a new phase in the bilateral relations between these nations, where various other factors began to overshadow the Durand Line issue [21]. Throughout successive communist administrations, Afghanistan faced internal conflicts and political turmoil. The arrival of Russian soldiers in 1979 was intended to strengthen the Soviet-supported governments. This event marked a turning point in the relationship between these countries, as other considerations started to take precedence over the Durand Line matter [22]. However, as the occupying forces gradually withdrew over time, a significant portion of these refugees returned to their country of origin. Additionally, a considerable number of individuals remained in Pakistan, contributing to the overall refugee population in the region [23].

There were 1.5 million individuals who remained. The period under consideration was characterized by the geopolitical rivalry known as the Cold War, which unfolded between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States seized this opportunity to take action against Russia. The Russian incursion into Afghanistan also posed a threat to Pakistan. The conflict in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation involved a tripartite alliance consisting of the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. This alliance engaged in a proxy war by providing various forms of support to the mujahideen, who were religious insurgents opposing the Soviet forces. The United States contributed financial resources and equipment, while Pakistan facilitated the insurgents by establishing contacts, offering safe havens, providing training, and offering logistical support. Additionally, Saudi Arabia established a network of seminaries along the border

to promote the concept of jihad among students, thereby serving as a source of new recruits for the mujahideen [24].

The Soviet Union ultimately faced the necessity of a total withdrawal of their military forces in 1989. Pakistan got substantial amounts of aid during this time period. Following the year 1989, the United Nations (UN) provided ongoing fiscal assistance to refugees, but significantly less in comparison to other sources during the war period. Regrettably, following the triumph, the United States promptly terminated its backing without offering any provisions for the mujahideen factions or initiating any post-war agreements. Subsequently, a period of armed conflict ensued in Afghanistan spanning from 1990 to 1998, commonly referred to as the civil war. The communist administration led by Najibullah experienced a significant setback in 1982 as a result of the withdrawal of Soviet support, hence exacerbating the existing turmoil within the nation [25]. Subsequently, during the period from 1997 to 2021, the Taliban regime successfully consolidated its authority in Kabul and the majority of Pashtun regions, with the assistance of Pakistan. The Taliban mostly consisted of subsequent generations of Pashtun components among the mujahideen who held democratic values, making it unlikely for them to embrace the Taliban and its radical ideology. The Tajik and Uzbek ethnic groups formed a coalition known as the Northern Alliance, which effectively controlled the Panjsher valley. This period of relative tranquility followed the conclusion of the Civil War. It is noteworthy to observe that despite the establishment of the Taliban regime. The affiliation of the stated entities with Pakistan is evident; nonetheless, they have refrained from addressing the Durand Line, implicitly upholding the stance of previous Afghan governments on this matter [26].

During the period of Taliban rule, it can be observed that diplomatic relations were quite steady. Indeed, the military saw them as strategic assets. Nevertheless, it did not function as a client state. Despite the appeal made by the Pakistani government to refrain from causing any harm to the Benyamin monuments, this plea was disregarded. Subsequently, Pakistani banks in Kabul were subjected to penalties for adhering to the directions issued by the United Nations. The Taliban in Afghanistan provided asylum to the Al Qaeda organization under the leadership of Osama bin Laden. The perpetrators carried out a series of terrorist assaults across several locations globally, including but not limited to a hotel in Yemen in 1992, the United States Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998, and a United States warship in 2000. On September 11, 2001, a series of highly consequential attacks occurred on multiple targets within the United States. Among these, the most severe impact was observed on the twin skyscrapers of the World Trade Center located in New York City [27].

In response to the events, President George W. Bush of the United States initiated a campaign known as the War on Terror, with a primary focus on combating the Al Qaeda network, its affiliates, and other global terrorist organizations [28]. The individual in question made explicit demands for Pakistan to align itself with a certain cause. Notably, two well-known statements attributed to this individual are: 'one must either align with our cause or be considered an adversary' and 'failure to provide support would result in retaliatory measures that will severely regress your society[29].' General Pervez Musharraf, the former military ruler of Pakistan, showed a resolute commitment by promptly aligning with the international coalition in the War on Terror. It is noteworthy to add that Pakistani contingents have demonstrated commendable performance as United Nations peacekeeping soldiers in several conflict-ridden areas such as Biafra, Croatia, and other locations. The international community has expressed appreciation for this effort. Pakistan played a significant role as a non-NATO ally in the United States-led "War on Terror" against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda during the US-Afghanistan conflict [30].

Regrettably, the occurrence of these and similar acts of terrorism perpetrated by extremist factions has led to the formation of a misguided perception among individuals residing in Western nations, suggesting that the Islamic faith promotes and supports acts of terrorism. The phenomenon commonly referred to as Islamophobia has emerged inside these nations, with a

significant portion of the population perceiving Muslim immigrants as carriers of terrorism infiltrating their own cultures. However, it is important to note that an examination of terrorist incidents resulting in the loss of innocent civilian lives reveals that around 80% of these acts of violence were directed towards Muslims, while only 20% were carried out by individuals associated with Muslim extremist groups. One of the most egregious instances occurred on March 15, 2019, in Christchurch, New Zealand, when an individual driven by racial hatred and white supremacist beliefs perpetrated an act of violence resulting in the deaths of 51 Muslim individuals within two mosques. The issue of violent bigotry persists [31].

In the context of counterterrorism efforts, the initial action undertaken by President Bush involved issuing a demand to the Taliban, urging them to surrender Osama Bin Laden and other prominent figures associated with the Al Qaeda network. In response to the Taliban's refusal to surrender, Afghanistan was subjected to a military intervention led by the United States and NATO forces. Consequently, Pakistan experienced yet another substantial surge in the number of refugees. A significant number of mujahideen accompanied the influx of refugees. The Western forces expeditiously removed the Taliban government. The United States initiated a process of nation-building. The establishment of a constitution and a parliamentary system with a presidential framework was a significant development in Afghanistan's political landscape. Notably, Hamid Karzai, a prominent Pashtun leader, assumed the role of the first president of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (Hamid, 2017). However, despite the defeat of the Taliban in the conflict, complete eradication of the group did not occur. Instead, the Taliban underwent a process of reorganization and afterward initiated a guerilla warfare campaign against both foreign soldiers and the government established by the United States. They enjoyed significant public backing. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) also established a presence in the adjacent country [32].

Methodology:

The methodology employed in this paper involved a meticulous process integrating several scholarly approaches. This included an extensive literature review conducted across academic databases, utilizing reputable sources encompassing scholarly articles, policy papers, governmental reports, and relevant publications. The data collection methodology entailed sourcing information from diverse and credible repositories to ensure a comprehensive overview of the Afghan Peace Deal's context, implementation, and regional implications. Thematic analysis served as a primary analytical tool, allowing for the organization and synthesis of multifaceted information. Additionally, case studies and comparative assessments were utilized to delineate nuanced aspects of peace negotiations, examining similar peace processes globally and within the South Asian context. Geopolitical evaluations formed a pivotal aspect of the study, entailing an in-depth exploration of regional power dynamics, the roles of key stakeholders, and the interplay of various interests and influences in the Afghan peace process. The synthesized findings underwent a rigorous peer review process to ensure academic rigor, validity, and reliability. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process, adhering to ethical principles in information gathering, analysis, and reporting. This comprehensive approach aimed to provide a robust assessment of the Afghan Peace Deal's intricacies, the dynamics of regional actors, and the broader implications for peace and stability within Central and South Asia.

Terrorist Incursions and Military Operations:

The pursuit of conflict resolution between Pakistan and Afghanistan saw Pakistan officially recognizing the legitimacy of the Hamid Karzai regime and expressing a strong intent to foster positive bilateral relations. Nonetheless, sustained uncertainty in the region poses a substantial threat to both regional peace and security. Presently, terrorist groups have established strongholds in Pakistan's tribal areas and Afghanistan's border regions, prompting both nations to engage in armed conflict due to terrorist activities within their respective borders, largely attributed to the American military campaign against terrorism. Gallagher (2019) noted Afghanistan's attribution of responsibility for these assaults to Pakistan. Suspicions from the United States

regarding Pakistan's alleged dual involvement in inadequately addressing the Taliban further complicated matters. Initially, Pakistan's historical support for the Taliban and their perceived Islamic principles garnered broad societal support. However, perceptions began to shift following terrorist strikes within Pakistan. Initial attempts to counter these activities involved deploying the underprepared Frontier Corp. militia to engage in dialogue. Peace accords were attempted with Baitullah Masud, leader of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), in 2004, 2005, and 2006, but all agreements were swiftly violated, rendering these campaigns unsuccessful. Significant military operations such as Operation Zalzala in South Waziristan in 2008 and Operation Sherdil in Bajaur and Mohmand agencies in 2009 targeted TTP strongholds. In 2007, the Tehrik-i-Nifas-i-Shariat Mohammadi took control of Pakistan's Swat region, prompting military responses known as Operation Rah-ul-Haq and Rah-ul-Rast, successfully eliminating this threat. Despite strong recommendations from the United States and Afghanistan, the military hesitated to act against the Haqqani group of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in North Waziristan. The TTP's devastating attack on a military-run school in Peshawar in December 2014, resulting in the tragic loss of around 100 young students, galvanized public resolve against radical violence.

The Haqqani group and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan are designated as terrorist organizations by various governments and international bodies. Nevertheless, President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan exhibited a consistent accusatory stance towards Pakistan. At now, it can be argued that the two nations are implementing a reciprocal strategy in response to incursions across their borders by non-state actors. The primary issue associated with these operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) region is the significant displacement of a large number of individuals from their residences. In addition to this, there exists collateral damage and the consequent loss of infrastructure. According to Ramez (2020), these actions result in the alienation of the local populace and foster feelings of animosity. The utilization of drone attacks by the United States has exacerbated the sentiments of the indigenous tribes residing in the affected regions. The growing animosity contributed to the rise of backing for the TTP since their Islamic ideology resonated with the tribal communities. The aforementioned reasons contributed to the tribal areas becoming a fertile ground for the proliferation of extremist ideologies. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) experienced no difficulty in attracting and enlisting fresh members. Despite the army's efforts to eradicate them in a particular region, they would promptly replenish their ranks and make a swift recovery. There appears to be a discernible decline in fervent support at present for the Afghan peace talks.

In the interim, it is noteworthy to acknowledge that certain actions undertaken by the United States in the context of the war on terror have encroached upon the sovereignty of Pakistan. These actions include drone strikes and an incident in September 2011 where US aircraft attacked a military outpost at Salala. It has been reported that this attack was a result of erroneous information on the part of the United States. During this particular period, it is noteworthy to mention that the United States obtained intelligence indicating the presence of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan. A clandestine operation was initiated at midnight on May 1st, 2012. Two covert helicopters departed from Jalalabad and traveled to Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, transporting a team of around 20 to 25 Navy SEALs. The helicopters were undetectable by radar, hence constituting a blatant infringement upon Pakistan's territorial sovereignty. The Special Operations Forces expeditiously neutralized Osama bin Laden and afterward transported his remains. During the process of takeoff, one of the helicopters experienced a crash. The individuals involved in the incident disposed of the deceased individual's body in the water, asserting that they had initially requested the Saudi Arabian authorities to assume responsibility for the remains. However, due to the Saudi authorities' refusal, they resorted to disposing of the body at sea. On May 2nd, 2011, President Barack Obama of the United States made a public announcement regarding the demise of Osama bin Laden. The revelation that bin Laden was found in Pakistan raised suspicions among certain segments of the American

population, suggesting potential awareness of his presence within the Pakistani government. The aforementioned circumstances resulted in a decline in the diplomatic ties between the United States and the Afghan government.

Challenges and Consequences Surrounding Taliban Power Aspirations in Afghanistan:

In the view of Pakistan, the Taliban's attempt to seize power would be unfavorable. If the Taliban were to forcibly remove the Afghan government, they would likely lose much of the international legitimacy they gained by expressing their willingness to negotiate for a political resolution to the conflict. This is especially true if they violently suppress former adversaries, close down institutions where foreign governments have heavily invested, and reverse the advancements made by women over the past two decades. Even if the Taliban fail to overthrow the Afghan government, their military advances jeopardize Pakistan's aspirations for the insurgents to engage in internationally recognized power-sharing arrangements. Islamabad's facilitation of U.S.-Taliban talks has helped ease tensions with Washington to some extent. As the withdrawal of troops continues, high-level U.S. engagement, primarily with Pakistan's military leadership, has focused on its role in stabilizing the Afghan peace process.

The peace process stands at risk if the Taliban persists in their push to capture territory, even if they stop short of taking full control. If the Taliban continue their offensive, Pakistan risks facing international criticism if it continues supporting the insurgents, such as offering refuge to the Taliban leadership. Pakistan understands that Afghanistan's economic stability and rebuilding necessitate substantial international financial assistance. Foreign Minister Qureshi's proposed plan for the Afghan peace process urges external powers to enhance and sustain economic involvement in the country's reconstruction and development. However, regardless of the amount of international aid, economic collapse would be inevitable if Afghanistan plunged into a full-scale civil war. While the U.S. and other major donors have pledged ongoing financial support to the Afghan government, this assistance will prove insufficient in preventing economic collapse amid an all-out civil conflict. Furthermore, aid distribution will become increasingly challenging in such a chaotic scenario. Even if the parties involved reach a peace settlement where the Taliban impose their strict version of Islam on governance, international support will be in doubt. In 2020, donors promised $12 billion in civilian aid for Afghanistan, but many nations conditioned these funds on progress in peace talks and adherence to principles of the rule of law, human rights, and gender equality. The European Union made the largest pledge at $1.4 billion but linked it to a peace settlement founded on republican and democratic principles. Should the Taliban pursue an all-encompassing military takeover, both the EU and individual Western countries would distance themselves from the new regime and likely impose sanctions against it.

The Peace Process:

Pakistan has grappled with a significantly higher toll from terrorism, resulting in substantial financial strain from continuous counterterrorism endeavors. This has had detrimental repercussions on the economy, notably affecting exports, foreign investments, and the once-thriving tourism sector. The scenic northern regions, renowned tourist hotspots, have seen dwindling visitor numbers due to security concerns, with Pakistan ranking 122nd among 140 nations as a tourism destination in 2012. For genuine reconciliation between Afghanistan and Pakistan, in-depth discussions on diverse strategic matters are imperative. However, India's substantial investments in Afghanistan have intensified regional complexities, potentially worsening the India-Pakistan relationship. Given the current circumstances, Afghanistan may gain minimal advantages by emphasizing the Durand Line issue. The border's high permeability, historically used by tribesmen and smugglers, has created avenues for non-state actors from both sides to conduct cross-border terrorism. This situation also demands an evaluation of potential incursions by Afghan security officers. The potential for a Taliban power seizure in Pakistan goes against their desired objectives. Such a move would likely undermine the international credibility the Taliban have built by expressing willingness for peaceful resolutions.

Employing violent measures against opposition, dismantling foreign-backed institutions, and reversing progress made in women's rights would further erode this credibility. Even if the Taliban's bid to overthrow the Afghan government fails, their military actions thwart Pakistan's hopes for the insurgents' participation in globally acknowledged power-sharing agreements. Pakistan's role in U.S.-Taliban negotiations has eased tensions with Washington to some extent. Amid ongoing troop withdrawals, substantial U.S. engagements, particularly with Pakistan's military leadership, have revolved around Pakistan's contribution to advancing the Afghan peace process. While acknowledging Pakistan's assistance, U.S. officials emphasize the need for more effort, given Pakistan's influence over the Taliban. Continuous U.S. support, including restored military aid - a priority for Pakistan's leadership - depends on this support. However, for sustainable peace efforts, the Taliban must reconsider their territorial conquest strategies, even if they fall short of seizing control. Pakistan risks global criticism if it continues backing the insurgents, like providing shelter to the Taliban shura, amid an ongoing offensive. Pakistan also acknowledges that Afghanistan's economic revival requires significant international financial aid. In a suggested approach to the Afghan peace process, Foreign Minister Qureshi urged external powers to augment their ongoing economic assistance for Afghanistan's reconstruction and development.

Therefore, Pakistan embarked on the construction of a border fence along its borders with Afghanistan and neighboring Iran. Afghanistan objected to the demarcation of the border, which it does not acknowledge. However, Afghanistan's lack of subsequent action in response to this objection might suggest recognition of the fence's necessity or external influence on its stance. The installation of this fence aims to prevent incursions by non-state actors and contain Afghanistan's issues within its territorial boundaries. This dispute has become the central point of contention between the two nations and could potentially improve diplomatic relations. Additionally, Pakistan sees an opportunity to proceed with a long-awaited project previously hindered by Afghanistan's position. However, there's another layer to Pak-Afghan interactions beyond the narratives presented to the public. There's a prevalent belief among Afghanistan and the United States that Pakistan is engaging in deceitful practices. Let's examine Pakistan's geopolitical standpoint. The primary goal is resolving the conflict in Afghanistan, vital for regional progress, particularly in Pakistan's context. Pakistan's reliance on foreign presence in Afghanistan seems more significant than foreign powers' reliance on Pakistan. Western nations perceived Islamists as a potential alternative to communism, whereas Pakistan saw them as a strategic counterbalance to Pashtun nationalism. Afghanistan held strategic significance as a buffer state for both Western powers and Pakistan, offering enhanced defensive capabilities against the Soviet Union to the latter. During the Soviet occupation, Pakistan's military aimed to bolster its defensive capabilities against India, conceptualizing the idea of strategic assets. Despite debates and advocacy by military figures like General Hamid Gul and former Army Chief Aslam Beg, the term "strategic assets" was never formally adopted as a policy by Pakistan. The current global paradigm shift in international relations, led by dominant global powers, and evolving understandings of warfare demand the abandonment of such concepts. Russia and China have emerged as influential players, serving as mediators, investors, and aid providers. The Taliban's acceptance of these nations has been evident.

The Taliban's participation in the November 2018 Russian Peace Conference marked a significant shift, showcasing their inclination toward diplomatic negotiations on an international platform. The uncertain situation in Afghanistan poses a threat to these influential nations as well. Regarding Pakistan's policy of providing moral support to religious groups like Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), headquartered in Pakistan but operating through its affiliates in Kashmir, the issue lacks an immediate resolution. However, those attuned to political dynamics can discern that India, under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, despite assertive regional measures and efforts to rally public support, faces a diminishing influence. Kashmiris appear to hold the advantage in this

evolving scenario. In connection with the Taliban, there are indications that they are beginning to acknowledge the adverse outcomes associated with persistent conflict. There is a noticeable desire among individuals within the group to mitigate their formerly inflexible stance on various issues. While the Taliban previously showed reluctance to engage in negotiations with the Afghan Government, they have recently started participating in these sessions. The expansion of infrastructure development has led to a decline in their presence, especially in urban areas. However, the government's influence is hindered by warlords. The emergence of the Islamic State Khorasan and IS presents a new security challenge, not only to overall stability but also to the Taliban. The United States found itself compelled to alter its earlier position of refusing to recognize the Taliban. It has been acknowledged that the Bonn agreement was flawed in its omission of their inclusion within the democratic framework. Former President Karzai was the first proponent of engaging in negotiations with the Taliban. On February 29, 2020, the United States entered into a peace accord with the Taliban. One of the prevailing issues for the United States is its involvement in Afghanistan, where the Afghan Government heavily relies on its presence. Additionally, the Pentagon acknowledges that the withdrawal of troops will likely lead to a deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan. However, there is a prevailing sentiment among the American populace advocating for the withdrawal of US soldiers, and the US Government continues to make pledges in alignment with this sentiment. The outcome of the power struggle between the Pentagon and politics remains uncertain. Nevertheless, it is imperative to incorporate the Taliban into mainstream politics in Afghanistan. The United States does not possess a solution to this problem, as it is perceived as an adversary by socioeconomically disadvantaged segments of society. The inclusion of Russia and China may foster more conciliatory perspectives among all parties involved. It is imperative for the United States to acquire the ability to refrain from conducting contentious elections marred by manipulation and instead facilitate the development of democratic forces.

Implementing more stringent regulations may effectively monitor the distribution of firearms and munitions to individuals with warlord status. The fate of the peace accord between the Taliban and the government remains uncertain, with prospects of reaching an agreement seeming unlikely. The United States intends to maintain a continued military presence in Afghanistan. However, if negotiations can be initiated by the administration, it would mark a significant achievement. As discussions prolong, the situation becomes increasingly intricate. China and Russia should actively engage in diplomatic talks with the Taliban on various issues. Efforts should prioritize widespread media distribution across Afghanistan, particularly in rural and peripheral areas. Regarding Pakistan, President Trump's initial stance toward the nation was confrontational. However, compelled by the cordial relations between Pakistan and the Taliban, the U.S. had to adopt a more conciliatory approach, relying on Pakistan's cooperation for peace negotiations. Pakistan played a pivotal role in organizing the Doha Peace Talks, earning appreciation from all participating governments. Similarly, Russia and China have actively sought and utilized Pakistan's assistance. It's evident that relying solely on military force is inadequate in effectively combating terrorism, necessitating a stronger focus on nation-building. Pakistan should refrain from categorizing the Taliban into 'good' and 'evil' factions. Reports suggest a period when Afghanistan and Pakistan harbored terrorists within their borders, leading to reciprocal acts of provocation and disturbance. Such a scenario, if repeated, could spiral into a detrimental cycle and should be mitigated, even if it means a temporary setback.

Conclusion:

In evaluating Pakistan's current geopolitical entanglement, it becomes evident that the nation finds itself immersed in a strategic landscape of unparalleled significance. China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) strategically involves Afghanistan as a key node for its Central Asian engagement. This intersects with the pivotal China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), pivotal in fostering regional connectivity, particularly in its third phase integrating Iran, Pakistan,

Afghanistan, and potentially India. This alignment of trade routes carries profound implications, acting as vital conduits to the Indian Ocean and providing Afghanistan a crucial gateway to international waters. Yet, within this economic web, Pakistan faces decisions crucial to regional dynamics, such as permitting bidirectional trade between Afghanistan and India, a move pivotal for Afghanistan's access to the Indian Ocean.

However, negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government present uncertainties in achieving a comprehensive peace accord. As the United States persists in maintaining a military presence, diplomatic engagements involving China, Russia, and Pakistan become pivotal elements for progress. Emphasizing the limitations of military force in combating terrorism, a shift towards nation-building becomes imperative, avoiding divisive factional categorizations and past patterns of harboring terrorists for enduring regional stability. Proposed solutions, including appointing a Pak-Afghan ambassador and refining policy measures, aim to enhance diplomatic ties and efficacy, emphasizing the fundamental human affinity between the citizens of both nations.

Leveraging this human element in their democratic pursuits holds the potential for positive bilateral relations and underscores the necessity for confidence-building measures. In this intricate geopolitical dance, Pakistan must maintain an active, positive role in Afghanistan's peace process while ensuring vigilance against cross-border violations. Allowing the Taliban and the government to establish their political equilibrium without external interference emerges as a vital prerequisite for sustained stability in the region. Ultimately, the evolution of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan amid their democratic developments hinges on nurturing this human connection and undertaking confidence-building measures, paving the way for enduring peace and cooperation between the nations.

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