

Implication of Taliban's Recent Relationship with Neighboring Countries and Its Impact on the Current Peace Process

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Abstract—The Taliban's relationships with the neighboring countries are a complex political issue that local people interpret one way, and politicians have different perceptions; therefore, it is a current issue that needs to be analyzed broadly and impartially. In this article, we investigate the Taliban's current relationships with the neighboring countries, as well as look at the effects these relationships have on the current peace negotiations in Doha, which began on September 12, 2020. The issue of Taliban and the current peace process has turned to be the center-of-attention for most of the neighboring countries, and every country has opened new pages in their foreign policies because after the Taliban-US peace agreement, the neighboring countries are meticulously and closely observing the situation and they believe that the Taliban is on the verge to tighten their grips on the future political power of Afghanistan. Every neighboring country of Afghanistan has political, economic, and social interests in this land-locked country. The Taliban's current role within the peace talks and anticipated future position within the Afghan government will have great political, economic, and social implications on countries in the region as they assess their foreign policies. As these countries move to form closer ties with the Taliban, the government of Afghanistan is worried that this may hinder the peace process. Afghanistan has long blamed Pakistan for sheltering the Taliban and providing safe havens for the terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda, and the recent visits of Taliban's delegations to Islamabad, Pakistan, have raised concern among government officials in Afghanistan who believe that the Taliban is not independent in their decisions, and for every step they take, are consulting with Pakistan's political leadership.

Keywords—Peace process, USA, Afghanistan, Taliban.

I. INTRODUCTION

AFGHANISTAN is a landlocked mountainous country located in the heart of south-central Asia bordering Pakistan to the east and south; China to the northeast; Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to the north; and Iran to the west.

Afghanistan has witnessed domestic harmony and improvement in its past history, but in its modern history, particularly after the Russian invasion in 1979, Afghanistan has turned from a peaceful into a war-torn country and a ground of violence and proxy-wars.

In 2001 after the attacks of 9/11 which resulted in nearly 3000 fatalities in the United States, in retaliation, the US and its allies attacked Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban government which only lasted for a few years. [1] The US invasion of Afghanistan sharply changed the political, social, and economic

situation of central and south-central Asia. The neighboring countries distinctly brought changes to their foreign policies toward Afghanistan and some of the countries pledged their full support to the US and in the future reconstruction of the country, whereas some other countries stayed away impartial.

Like the US invasion, the peace process negotiation is also of uttermost importance not only to the neighbors of Afghanistan but to the whole world particularly, to the great powers and the rivals of the US, because in addition to NATO and ISAF, the whole world is engaged directly and indirectly in this longest war in the history of America. In this longest war, besides other fatalities of NATO allies, America lost nearly 2500 of its soldiers [2] and 2010 was the deadliest year for international forces as more than 700 foreign military personals lost their lives as shown in Fig. 1 [3]. The figure shows that the deadliest year for western coalition forces was 2010 in which they had more than 700 fatalities.

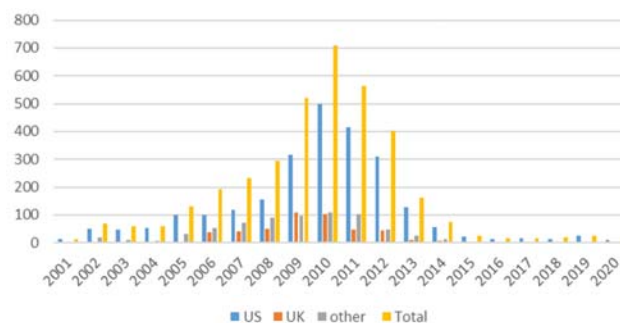


Fig. 1 Western coalition casualties in Afghanistan [2]

Finally, the US showed its inclination to bring its longest and most expensive war to an end and for that, they signed a peace agreement with the Taliban in the capital of Qatar, Doha on February 29, 2019. The agreement addressed four main issues: reducing violence in all parts of Afghanistan, starting intra-Afghan negotiations, withdrawing foreign troops, and guaranteeing that Afghanistan should not again become a haven for Al Qaeda and other terrorist factions [4].

Signing the peace agreement between America and the Taliban changed the foreign policies of neighboring countries toward Afghanistan and every state is trying to invite the leadership of the Taliban to have close contact with them because they think that the Taliban is going to be the future

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political power, and every state tries to have a close contact with a political party in another country having the greater political power and influence.

Analyzing the Taliban relationship with other countries is really a complicated issue for most of analysts and political experts because the Taliban still does not have international legitimacy, and still many states and international agencies are worried and doubtful about their foreign relations.

This article has impartially analyzed the Taliban relations with the neighboring countries based on reality, and trusted sources, and joint statements and explored the complexity and obscurity of the Taliban's current efforts of building relations with neighboring countries.

II. IRAN

Iran is a country with whom the relationship of Afghanistan has ebbed and flowed throughout history. Iran was not happy with the return of the Taliban in 1996, this relation worsened when eleven Iranian diplomats disappeared in 1998 during the Taliban's attack on Mazar-e Sharif, the Iranian authority blamed the Taliban for the killing of the diplomats and deployed more than 7000 troops to the Afghan border [5]. There are other ideological and religious differences between the two neighboring countries as Iran is predominantly a Shia country while the citizens of Afghanistan are almost 85% Sunni Muslims.

The tension between Iran and the US over the proliferation of atomic energy, the tension in the Strait of Hormuz, and the deterring of US interests in the Middle East by Iranian-backed Militia are the factors that increased tension between the two countries which raised Iranian concerns about the presence of US troops on its borders and the Taliban was a good option for them to counter the US and NATO presence there, so the Iranian foreign policy makers started to rebuild their relationship with the Taliban as the US and other intelligence agencies repeatedly assessed that Iran is offering support and bounties to the Taliban in Afghanistan to carry out attacks on international forces [6].

The recent invitations of the Iranian government to the Taliban show that Iran is determined to forget the bitter past chapter of its relationships with the Taliban and are willing to open a new chapter of cordial relations because its policymakers are assured that the Taliban is going to be an important player in the future of Afghanistan. On the other hand, Iran is alarmed about the future of its economic growth as it is badly affected by the US sanctions, and Afghanistan's market is vital for it, therefore a good relationship with a strong political party is the priority of its foreign policy.

For normalization of the relations with the Taliban, Iran called on the leadership of the Taliban to visit Iran, and formally the Taliban accepted the invitation and sent a delegation in September 2019 to discuss economic and other regional issues with the leadership of Iran as reported by the Taliban spokesman [7]. Subsequently, another delegation of the Taliban had visited Iran on January 27, 2012 which was led by the deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and according to the spokesman of Taliban, both parties discussed the current

peace process, border issues, and matters related to Afghan refugees [8].

The Taliban in turn also has own interests in building a close relationship with Iran. This faction tries to get international legitimacy by visiting foreign countries including Iran. The Taliban also tries to build relationships with a Persian, and Shia country like Iran to reduce the hatred of Persian and other minorities of Afghanistan towards them, as the Persians and other minorities in Afghanistan were badly affected during the civil wars between Ahmad Shah Masood and the Taliban, and therefore they are not willing to welcome the comeback of the Taliban.

III. PAKISTAN

Pakistan is another neighboring country of Afghanistan located to the east and south and sharing almost 2500 km border. Pakistan has a very close and candid relationship with the Taliban from the emergence of this faction to its ruling (1996-2001), but at the same time, the relation between both parties has ebbed and flowed during the US invasion. It is also proved that Pakistan has great influence over the Taliban leadership and played a key role in bringing the Taliban to the table of the peace negotiation.

Afghanistan, including other countries, has repeatedly blamed Pakistan for supporting and financing the Taliban to combat Afghan and international security forces in Afghanistan [9]. On January 1, 2018, President Trump tweeted: "the United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!" [10]. Obama had also insisted during his presidency that Pakistan has given Al Qaeda safe-havens, he said in remarks about his strategy about Pakistan and Afghanistan: "So let me be clear: Al Qaeda and its allies -- the terrorists who planned and supported the 9/11 attacks -- are in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Multiple intelligence estimates have warned that Al Qaeda is actively planning attacks on the United States homeland from its safe haven in Pakistan" [11].

It is also clear that Pakistan has always had a cordial and close relationship with the Taliban from the inception of the Taliban, but when the US invaded Afghanistan for the sake of its homeland security, Pakistan openly helped international intelligence agencies to track hundreds of Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders. For the pleasure of US authorities, Pakistan intelligence agency (ISI) ignoring the diplomatic norms, arrested Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef in June 2002 at his house in Islamabad and removed him to an undisclosed location in Peshawar and later investigated by the Pakistani and US intelligence agencies as reported by the New York Times [12].

Today, Pakistan is seeking to rebuild past cordial relationships with the leadership of the Taliban with a new vision, because after the signing of the peace agreement between the Taliban and the US, Pakistan assessed the future political power of the Taliban and observed the rapid regional political changes.

Pakistan tries with its full force and wariness to help the

Taliban to come with great political power, and for that, they released Mullah Baradar after consultations with US officials. The release of Mullah Baradar opened a new chapter in the politics of Pakistan and the region, and the peace negotiations accelerated [13].

The current government of Pakistan under the leadership of Imran Khan has brought changes to the foreign policies of the country and played a key role in bringing the Taliban to the table of negotiation. Pakistan is working more closely with the Taliban leadership and repeatedly invites the Taliban delegations to Islamabad to rebuild its relations and increase its influence and also to show its commitment to the current peace process.

IV. CHINA

China is another neighboring country that shares its border to the northeast of Afghanistan. China's position and interests in Afghanistan are different from Pakistan and Iran. Instead of the supporting the Taliban and other minorities in Afghanistan, China prioritized to hunt Uyghur extremists inside Afghanistan as the Afghan intelligence agency (NDS) reported [14] that they have arrested a 10-member Chinese group who were trying to hunt down Uyghur extremists with the help of the Haqqani network. The Indian news agency also later reported [15] that the Afghan intelligence agency had received tips from Indian intelligence agency about the relationship of Chinese nationals with Haqqani network to track down Uyghur extremists and later after the incident President Ashraf Ghani authorized the first Vice President, Amrullah Saleh, a former chief of the Afghan intelligence agency, to overview the investigation by himself.

Besides the concerns of Uyghur extremists, China has deep economic and political interests in the region. Currently China sees that the Taliban is on the verge to gain political power and Chinese foreign policy makers are willing to invite the political delegation of the Taliban as they invited the leadership of the Taliban in December 2019 and announced that the core objective of the invitation was to support the ongoing peace process and to show the good wishes of the Chinese towards peace in Afghanistan [16].

V. TURKMENISTAN, UZBEKISTAN, AND TAJIKISTAN

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are the other three neighboring countries with less influence in the region and are located to the north of Afghanistan. These countries stayed mostly impartial in the civil wars and in the current unrest and instead of supporting proxy wars in the region, they continued to focus mainly on economic and business transitions and did not miss a chance to build good relationships with the Taliban and support the ongoing peace process.

Uzbekistan is a country that shows more interest in the current peace process and invited the Taliban delegation to visit Uzbekistan in 2018 where the government of Uzbekistan motivated them to prioritize the current peace process, and discussed security issues and matters related to the power line as reported by Reuters [17].

VI. CONCLUSION

The Taliban's relationships with Afghanistan's neighboring countries are of uttermost importance, and at the same time a complicated issue, because it is a faction that still lacks international legitimacy and international security, and intelligence agencies are worried about its leadership and their movements.

Regional and neighboring countries are bringing changes to their foreign policies towards the faction of the Taliban because they see that they are on the verge of gripping political power in the future government of Afghanistan.

Every country very meticulously and cleverly observes the situation and is working hard to safeguard their political and economic interests in the future of Afghanistan, and they see the Taliban as a good tool for that.

The regular contact of the neighboring countries with the Taliban may create regional consensus for the peace process, however at the same time it has created concerns and doubts among international agencies and political analysts, particularly among political figures in the government of Afghanistan, which may hamper the peace process.

While Pakistan and Iran are two Afghan-neighboring countries that are being blamed for financing and harboring terrorist groups including the Taliban to combat local and international forces in Afghanistan, both countries can also play an important role in the peace process.

The government of Afghanistan is becoming increasingly concerned about the repeated visits of Taliban delegations to Islamabad. Many civilians and the government officials of Afghanistan believe that Pakistan does not have sincere intentions and only aims to increase its influence and serve its national interests.

It is worth to be noted that Russia and India are the other two countries sharing no border with Afghanistan, yet both have deep political and economic interests in the region and have been investing millions of dollars annually. In one such deal, India spent \$300 million in four years after signing the Strategic Partnership Agreement with Afghanistan in 2011.

The Taliban in turn uses their visits to the neighboring countries as a tool to gain international legitimacy; visiting Iran to discuss security and refugee issues, arranging meetings with international agencies such as UNICEF and WHO, and supporting the Polio vaccine, all of which are some of the new strategies the Taliban are implementing to change their image among the international community.

The Taliban is seeking drastic measures and new strategies to portray themselves as a moderate faction.

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