



Policy Brief # PB-70-2021

June 17, 2021

Afghan Imperial Misadventure: Unlikely Peace or Continued Instability

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By Minaahil Kamran

The reconciliation efforts kicked-off in the wake of Taliban peace negotiations after nearly two decades of fighting a war that bore no fruit. The US War on Terror to counter the Taliban threat that includes a full-scale military assault on an already socio-economically crippled country has taken a relatively softer stance now. Hopes of achieving a military victory in Afghanistan over the resilient Taliban has been long forgotten by the US. The war which was initiated by US, and many allied nations including Pakistan, is in its winding-up stage. President Biden is reported to have said:

‘It Is Time to End the Forever War’

Afghan Peace Deal or “Us Withdrawal Deal”

The signing of the peace deal in Doha, Qatar in February 29, 2020 signifies the agreement to end the long war in Afghanistan between the superpower USA and Afghan Taliban. The peace deal consists of relatively same terms of agreement which were agreed upon in the previous 2019 deal under president Trump. The relatively distinct term of agreement is the withdrawal of the US and the coalition forces from the battlegrounds in Afghanistan. It is a two sided agreement which also made the Taliban agree to not carry out or allow the terrorist groups on the afghan soil. Another term of agreement was the negotiations with the afghan government of Kabul to be carried out for the purpose of a strong capital hold. But, the situation is creating more complications than easing the tensions. The recent presidential elections in Afghanistan were so muddled that the incompetent state announced the results after 5 months of the election date and caused the formation of the split government. President Ashraf Ghani secured 50.64% of votes as compared to Abdullah Abdullah, who secured 39.5% - as reported by the election commission of Afghanistan – both candidates announced themselves as the winners. Both parties finally reached an agreement when President Ghani gave Abdullah Abdullah the right to select half of the cabinet but the

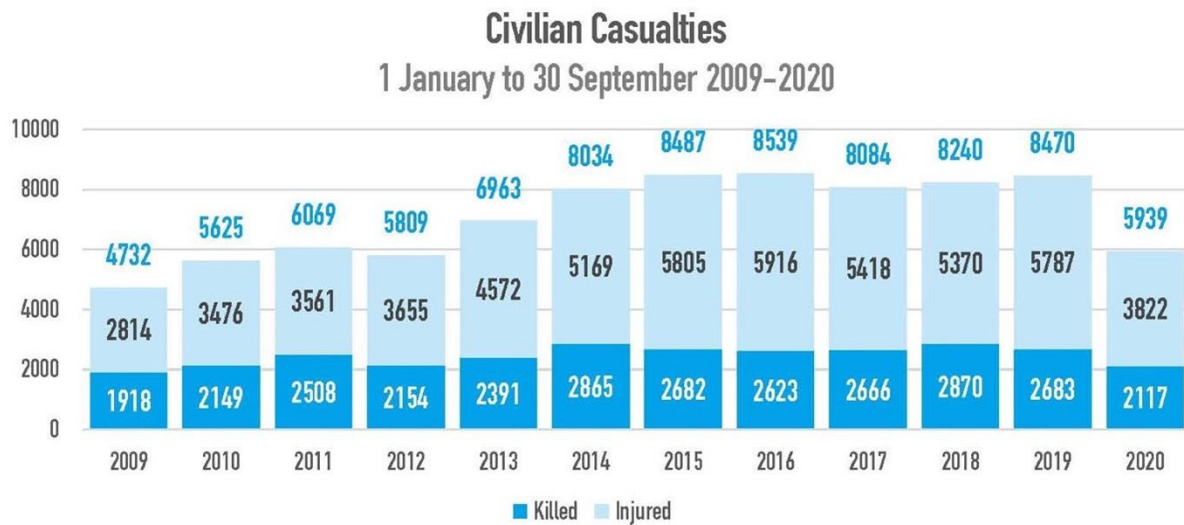
situation got worse after Abdullah Abdullah announced to leave the government because of their disagreements with each other. The use of the phrases '*reduction of violence*' instead of *ceasefire* in the agreement along with "*Afghan soil will not be used against the security of the United States and its allies*" are significant to be highlighted. Additionally, the agreement includes the details of the withdrawal of the US forces along with all the non-diplomatic civilians and other personals appointed in Afghanistan within the limit of 14 month after the official signing of the agreement. The intra-afghan dialogues is to be assisted by the US which includes the terms of minimized role of Taliban in the government in the Kabul future, the protection of the rights of women and other particular minorities targeted generally in Afghanistan and the release of the combat and political prisoners with US working on '*all relevant sides*'. The extended agreement also includes US negotiating with the UN regarding the removal of the Taliban members from the '*sanctions list*' after the confidence building measures of releasing the prisoners in the intra-afghan dialogues takes place.¹ A relatively distinct term of agreement was such that by March 10, 2020 Afghan government and Taliban will undergo 'dialogues and negotiations' and also an exchange of prisoners will take place by this date. The release of prisoners started but there is no significant development in that case. The dilemma is Afghan government is not signatory to the deal which means the deal is not binding upon them. Moreover, the internal political chaos after 2018 Afghan elections and the uncertainty of the leadership makes the situation even more ambiguous. While the leader of the command of Afghan government is not yet decided, the man who has the command of Taliban is also not clear. There are internal divisions among these factions as well. Currently, Afghan Taliban is divided into two main groups: Quetta Shura, the one who negotiated but lacks sufficient military experience, and then there is another group which was present on ground throughout the war and because of whom Taliban now controls 50% of the land of Afghanistan. The latter recently threatened to invade some of the Afghan cities e.g. Kunduz, Ghazni, Pul-i-Khumri and Farah. In case they succeed in their conquest, it will surely make the efficacy of this deal questionable. As the US troops continue to leave, several Afghan military bases and four district centers will have surrendered themselves to Taliban wrath.

¹ Grant Farr. (2021, Feb 24). What happened to the Afghan Peace Talks? *E-International Relations*.

The security situation of the country is also quite alarming as the Afghan National and Security Forces (ANDSF) cannot function without the help of US Airforce, its training and support. Although the violence from Taliban side on US forces has reduced, the events of violence and attacks on Afghan military and government are still taking place. According to a report of Washington Post in October 2020:

“The Taliban staged 356 attacks, two suicide bombings and 52 mine explosions across the country, killing 51 civilians and wounding 157. They said more than 400 insurgents were killed but did not give casualty figures for Afghan forces.”²

UN has also released a report on Afghanistan security issues that although the statistics of civilian causality has reduced to 30% in 2020 as compared to 2019, the number is not satisfactory either. The number of registered civilian casualties has not reduced, and Afghanistan is still the deadliest country to live in, with respect to private property, lives and other basic necessities. The below placed graph shows the number of civilian casualties in the last decade:



² (2020, October 28). Afghanistan: The peace negotiations have become an extension of war by other means. Center for Strategic & International Studies.

Source: *Adapted from UNAMA, “Afghan Peace Talks Fail to Slow Civilian Casualty Toll”, May 26, 2021*

US forces, on the other hand, have lost much of their air strike and targeting capabilities to Taliban and also their military and civil aid programs have also lost ground. US does not share an accurate number of security personnel present in Afghanistan but this deal and the compromises US has already made to camouflage the conundrum shows that US is now grabbing its gear. Moreover, the Taliban ties with al-Qaeda seem to continue even if its possibility is low. Their presence in Afghanistan is something which cannot be ignored, so in case these groups decide to influence the deal or don't pay heed to it after US, withdrawal then the US is helpless. For the US, the global war on terror (GWOT) has become more cumbersome in COVID-19 era, along with the challenge of rising power of China. Although Biden administration will be providing financial assistance and consultancies but US is also concerned about gaining intelligence information as the CIA Director William Burns³ warned the Senate Intelligence Committee that US would not be able to gather intelligence against the insurgent threats after its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Biden administration is also planning to review the February deal if there arose a realization that Taliban are not withholding by the agreement.

Afghan Peace Deal also failed to settle the issues of Afghan refugees. Afghan refugees are considered to be one of the largest refugee populations in the world with a number of 2.6 million registered ones around the world. A report of European Union states that the number of Afghan refugees who were returned by European countries from 2015 to 2016 witnessed a triple increase. The deal falls short in addressing their plight of deportation from their host states. Neither does it do anything to ensure that the Afghan neighbors and other host countries implement the non-refoulement policy to safeguard the refugee interests. According to a report of Amnesty International (2019):

³ Merve Seren. (2021, April 18). ANALYSIS: A critical stage in Afghan peace process. *Analysis, Asia - Pacific*.

“In recent years, along with Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Finland and Turkey have forcibly returned tens of thousands of Afghans whose asylum claims have been rejected.”⁴

Apart from internal outrage, there are several external factors that cannot be overlooked because of the historical role they played in the Afghan issue. Most important of them, among others, whose consent in this situation matters are Russia, China, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan and in case one of them is not satisfied with the proceedings, there are major chances of this peace process to be halted. Russia and Pakistan can persuade Taliban to achieve their interests that can hinder the peace negotiations while on the other hand; Iran can also manipulate it with its presence in Afghanistan and through her connections with various elements inside the country. Afghan Peace Deal also missed this factor from taking into account. It was not obligatory to include all of them into the negotiation process because that would make the process more difficult but at least their concerns in the process must be heard to attain regional stability.

⁴ (2019, June 20), Afghanistan’s refugees: forty years of dispossession. *Amnesty International*.