

# ISAS Insights

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## Afghanistan: Dilemmas for Peace and Security

*The perception that the Donald Trump Administration in Washington may be inexorably sliding into a state of dysfunctionality, might have prompted Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani to hold out an olive branch to his Taliban opponents and make a peace offer to them. How the Taliban will react is uncertain. They are disunited but, at the same time, gaining ground in battle. The peace process will require greater calibration than what exists at this time between Kabul and Islamabad. So, as of now, peace is not in sight and fighting is likely to continue. However, with the United States' interests and even capability on the wane, greater responsibility to end the conflict devolves on the regional leadership if it is to avoid wider conflagrations, which will be to the benefit of none.*

Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury<sup>1</sup>

The face of Mullah Omar, the former supreme commander and spiritual leader of the Taliban, bore no resemblance to that of the mythical beauty, Helen of Troy, in Homer's epic tale, 'The Iliad'. Yet, both these two faces, thousands of years apart, caused the launch of a thousand ships, maritime vessels in the case of Helen, and airships in the case of Omar. On both occasions, the launches initiated prolonged wars. The war in Troy ended with the parting gift of a huge wooden horse from the Greeks, dragged into the city within walls by jubilant Trojans who wrongly assumed the Greeks had decamped, when in reality they were, in

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sufficient numbers, hidden in the horse's belly. This was in defiance of the warning of the priest, Laocoon, who, with remarkable perception, had issued a dire warning, "I fear the Greeks", he had said with remarkable foresight, "even though they come bearing gifts". Taking this metaphor further into the current Afghan situation, the Taliban too have now been offered the gift of the olive branch of peace talks. This is Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani's proposal of 28 February 2018. However, it seems the Taliban, unlike the Trojans of yore, may not be willing to buy; not because they are aware of the outcome as in the Greek classics but because of sheer pragmatism. They feel they are on the roll, and offers from the enemy can only be designed to impede their progress.

Let us go back a bit into the past, tracing the beginning of the current Afghan imbroglio. It began 17 years ago when President George Bush of the United States (US) ordered the invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in 2001. This he did to oust the pro-Al Qaeda regime of the Taliban. The initial goal was achieved and a US-friendly Hamid Karzai government was installed. However, violence and instability ensued, as the Taliban continued to fight as insurgents, and three successive US administrations, with their western allies, struggled in vain to contain the insurgency. Ten years later, in 2011, US President Barack Obama began withdrawing troops from the country, with most leaving by 2014. Some remained in a counterterrorism operation, but the war was far from won.

Enter Donald Trump in January 2017. Initially, candidate Trump, in the face of enormous war losses, had been questioning why the US was fighting the war in Afghanistan at all. Through his favourite medium of communication, the tweets, he had once observed, "We have wasted an enormous amount of blood and treasure in Afghanistan. Their government has zero appreciation. Let's get out!" In the months that followed, there was an internal debate within the rather dysfunctional White House between the now departing National Security Advisor (NSA) H R McMaster and a former senior aide, Steve Bannon. McMaster wanted escalation and Bannon wanted out. Eventually, it was Bannon who went out, not of Afghanistan, unceremoniously dismissed from his post. McMaster won the debate and Trump's ears. On 21 August 2017, Trump rolled out his new strategy to stay in Afghanistan, based on conditions in the ground, not timetables – this meant the US would stay so long it is safe to do so, and no timetable of withdrawal would be provided. However, in the field, despite US losses of many lives and US\$1 trillion (\$1.3 trillion), insurgents are openly

active in up to 70 per cent of the country. So the war was poised to become perennial. Ironically, despite early inclination to leave, Trump was becoming more deeply mired. Now that McMaster is also gone out of the revolving door, being replaced by the hawkish John Bolton, it is uncertain what advice Bolton would tender. However, if the past is any guide, Trump will be his own boss, still as unpredictable as ever.

Then, on 28 February 2018, Ghani, in the second meeting of the Kabul Peace Process, made a surprising offer for unconditional peace talks with the Taliban. By now, the latter was able to strike wherever they wanted. Ghani appeared to recognise the legitimacy of the Taliban as a political entity, though not that of the Al Qaeda, who are viewed as largely foreigners with a global and not an Afghan national, agenda, whom the Taliban also did not care for much. Also, the Taliban's position, unlike that of the Al Qaeda, touches a different chord when it is viewed as a struggle aimed at ending prolonged foreign occupation. Ghani also offered to review parts of the Constitution, which the Taliban wanted scrapped. All this seemed to be in line with what Afghanistan's United Nations (UN) Ambassador, Mahmoud Saikal was saying, "There are two categories of the Taliban. One is the reconcilable elements who are in touch with us, who are talking to us, and the other is the irreconcilables, who have chosen to fight".<sup>2</sup> There is some empathy with this approach in Washington. With the carnage continuing, there was a burgeoning view that the US has no choice but to promote peace talks. Negotiations could not be taken off the table. Indeed Laurel Miller, a former senior US official explained that, the goal of the Trump strategy was to "increase military pressure on the Taliban in order to motivate them to engage in a political settlement". She concluded, with much perception, that there was no evidence to suggest that the US and Afghan forces can defeat the Taliban on the battlefield".<sup>3</sup>

The Taliban response to the olive branch has been circumspect. The Taliban may feel they are in stronger grounds. First, militarily, they appear to be gaining, though it is also a fact that they have not been able to win a provincial seat of government. Secondly, they can see that, because of internal dynamics, a near-chaotic US Administration seem to be unravelling at the highest reaches. On both counts, the time may be ripe to win, as Trump himself would say,

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Rampton and Jonathan Landay, 'Trump rejects peace talks with Taliban in departure from Afghan Strategy', *Reuters.com*, 29 January 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Interview of Laurel Miller by Susan B Glasser, See "Laurel Miller: The Full Transcript", *The Global Politico*, 24 July 2018.

‘the best deals’. This is in spite of their perception of Ghani as a ‘puppet’ of sorts of the West, imposed by foreigners and lacking in domestic legitimacy. Why not take on both at the same time, though the initial Taliban predilection was only to talk to the real opposition, the West? Hence, the cautious Taliban response that they were studying the proposal and that “the US and Afghanistan have to pitch realistic and non-bullying peace proposals”; and that “the Taliban would be ready to give a careful read to sensible proposals”.<sup>4</sup> However, they are likely to drive a hard bargain. One Taliban leader has laid down that a possible solution would be a “fifty-fifty sharing formula in all Ministries and major Directorates, in 34 provinces, all over Afghanistan”.<sup>5</sup> This would be a bitter pill to swallow for both Kabul and Washington. They may also want the government to declare a unilateral ceasefire. They can see that Ghani is exhausted, and Trump has no more appetite for more blood and, worse still, greater costs. However, McMaster’s replacement as the NSA, the super-hawk, Bolton, starting 9 April 2018, may have a significant impact on the US Afghan policy.

Bolton’s position on Afghanistan is that there should be no artificial time limit. Any negotiations should be on America’s terms. He went on record as saying that the Afghan war would be won or lost in Pakistan. In other words, the perceived support of the Taliban by Pakistan must be ended at all costs. He is, of course, an arch conservatist like the new Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. They will now be at the helm of the foreign policy establishment. Meanwhile, after making the peace offer, Ghani significantly sought Pakistan’s help, when the Pakistani National Security Adviser, General Nasser Janjua travelled to Kabul and met with him (this was following a discussion in Islamabad between Ghani and the Afghan Ambassador, in course of which the latter briefed General Janjua on the peace offer). There was also a meeting in Washington between Pakistan’s Prime Minister, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, and US Vice President Mike Pence. Nothing much seems to have come out of it other than American hectoring on Pakistan to ‘do more’ to rein in the extremists, which was like preaching to the converted. Pakistan would like to do that but is not being able, just like the US is unable to contain the Taliban.

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<sup>4</sup> Yaqoob-ul Hassan, ‘Fruitless or a Breakthrough? Making sense of Ashraf Ghani’s Peace offer to the Taliban’, *The Diplomat*, 12 March 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Yousafzai, ‘Secrets of the Afghan Peace Talks’, *Daily Beast*, 3 January 2018.

A brief analysis of the philosophical basis of American conservative categories may be in order. Roughly, according to some analysts there are four<sup>6</sup>. The first is the ‘paleo-cons’ – the oldest and the least influential, dating back to anti-war conservatism in the 1930s. Then, there are the ‘neo-conservatives’, liberal anti-communists from the 1970s, whose intellectual guru was Leo Strauss, an idealistic Platonist, whose influence over the Bush Administration was paramount (Dick Cheney, etc.). Then, third, there were the ‘realists’ – internationalists, stability-oriented, committed to ‘Pax Americana’, but sceptical of grand crusades. Henry Kissinger would be a good example. Fourth and finally, there are the ‘pure hawks’ – “America First” interventionists, shorn of any ‘neo-con’ idealism. It is to this group that Bolton emphatically belongs, and, to a great extent, Pompeo. However, Trump himself, who tends to be *instinctual* rather than *intellectual* (that is moved by ‘instincts’ rather than by ‘intellect’) is hard to easily categorise, and could be a mix-of-all. However, it is now clear what the nature of advice tended to him will be. Nonetheless, come what may, despite all this war-drum beating in Washington, a clear military victory is beyond the realm of possibility, and Afghanistan is likely to retain the reputation of ‘the graveyard of empires’.

So, what can be a possible solution? In a book published just over two years ago, entitled “Afghanistan: The Next Steps”, Shahid Javed Burki, Riaz Hassan and the author made a proposal.<sup>7</sup> It was this: That following the withdrawal of foreign troops, during the next 10 years or so in what a UN Security Council resolution has called ‘the Transitional Decade’, the governance of the country would pass on to a mechanism created by the UN and Afghan authorities working together. This would comprise the President of Afghanistan and the Secretary General of the UN acting as co-chairs of an ‘Afghanistan Governing Council’ (AGC). The Council would comprise, apart from the two, tested representatives from neighbouring countries with the highest stakes: Iran, Pakistan, India, China, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan. Afghanistan would, of course, remain sovereign and the Cabinet (which now could include the Taliban) would continue to function, but with all major policy decisions endorsed by the AGC. The AGC would provide troops to train and support the Afghan Security Forces. The mechanism would be funded by UN extra-budgetary resources, but would function outside of the UN framework, to limit the traditional

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<sup>6</sup> See *The Straits Times*, 26 March 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Shahid Javed Burki, Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury, and Riaz Hassan, *Afghanistan: The Next Phase*, (Melbourne University Press, 2014), pp. 203-210.

‘P5’ rivalries of the UN Security Council politics.<sup>8</sup> The solution is admittedly not ideal and would require sharpening and honing, but it does represent ‘thinking out of the box’, a critical necessity, which would, while preserving national sovereignty, buttress it by international involvement, though not interference.

As spring approaches, fighting in Afghanistan may resume with greater ferocity, as the snow will melt, rendering Taliban attacks easier to execute. So, the prognosis is that the fighting and discussions on peace will continue side by side. However, it is noteworthy that Ghani is keen on calibrating policy with Pakistan, a country toward which he has demonstrated considerable antipathy in the past. This could flow from a perception of a near-chaotic situation in the uppermost reaches of the US Administration, which would render a regional approach more rational. However, a constraining factor may be the current confusing state of politics in Pakistan at this time. Elections are due soon and a ‘caretaker government’, as prescribed in the Constitution, is expected to assume office on 1 June 2018. No significant policy is expected to be undertaken during its three month in office, though the Army, usually as important in decision making in Pakistan as any civilian government (some would argue even more), would continue to provide continuity. However, both the Army and the politicians in Pakistan will need to think carefully. While some of them may wish for a triumph of Ghani’s opponents over him, a Taliban-dominated government in Kabul would have severe negative ramifications for Pakistan.

The Tate Gallery in London owns a painting, often out on loan, by Lady Elizabeth Butler, of a scene from the first Anglo-Afghan War of 1842. It is called ‘Remnants of an Army’, depicting just that. It is in the form of a British army officer, Surgeon William Brydon, said to be the sole survivor of an invading military expedition, straggling to safety on horseback, near collapse from exhaustion, at the end of a long retreat from Kabul. It could be read as symbolic of all who have imprudently invaded Afghanistan. However, how would the Afghans react to a genuine peaceful international assistance as the above outlined proposal entails, to bring relief to their war-torn and troubled land? The global community may need to withstand that test when the invaders go home and the next phase begins. Inaction by the rest

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<sup>8</sup> The five permanent members of the Security Council, also known as ‘P5’, that is , the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, and the Russian Union, are notorious for their lack of consensus on major decisions as their perceived national interests are almost always at variance, particularly between the western powers and China and Russia. Since each has the veto power, the positive vote of all is a prerequisite for approval of decisions. Only on rare occasions is there an agreement, as in the recent case of sanctions against North Korea.

of the world during that phase may not be an option. Initiatives would need to be taken. As the Bengali poet, the mighty Rabindranath Tagore had said, should you wish to cross the sea, it would not do to simply stay at its edge and stare at the waters!

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