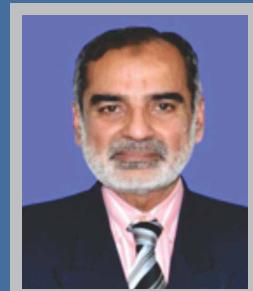




# US EXIT FROM AFGHANISTAN – EMERGING SCENARIO AND IMPLICATIONS



Khalid Rahman

## ABSTRACT

In the wake of the US-Taliban deal 2020, this article attempts to analyze the emerging scenario in the Afghan conundrum, opportunities and challenges for Afghanistan as well as regional stakeholders. It discusses US invasion of Afghanistan, evaluates former's transitory victory over the Taliban government, which was only to be spoiled later by the 'formidable' Taliban, making it 'the longest war' ever fought by the US until it brought both warring parties to the negotiating table for dialogue, which culminated in historic US-Taliban deal (February 2020), requiring release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners, exodus of US forces from Afghanistan, initiation of intra-Afghan talks and reduction of violence. The paper while discussing some positives and challenges to the dialogue process, offers three possible scenarios emerging from the intra-Afghan dialogue; it posits that gradual progress is the likely and sustainable outcome. The paper concludes with a number of lessons that can be drawn from the Afghan Wars and particularly discusses Pakistan's role in the peace process and recommends that it should increase its engagement with Kabul as the US prepares to leave the tumultuous land of Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** United States, Afghanistan, War on Terrorism, 9/11, Afghan Taliban, Afghan Peace Process, US Forces Withdrawal.



*Whatever may be the background and facts behind the incidents of 9/11, the US, owing to these incidents, had the sympathies of the world as well as some moral reasoning on its side*

## Introduction

The history of war in the world is as old as the man itself. The summary of this history is that it ends in the defeat and sometimes even demolition of the weak and the victory of the powerful. But if the war prolongs without any victory or defeat, its political, economic and physical costs keep increasing, and then comes a point where the importance of dialogue, diplomacy and arbitration increases manifold. Eventually both parties, looking at their position, decide to call it an end.

The Global War on Terrorism (GWoT) waged by the United States (US) in 2001 against Taliban in Afghanistan has reached the same point after two decades, and a deal between both parties has been made on 29 February 2020 as the first major step to conclude the war. According to the deal, the US forces will completely exit from Afghanistan by May 2021.<sup>1</sup>

In this backdrop, this article seeks to analyze the US exit from Afghanistan and evaluate the emerging scenarios and implications for the later, as well as the regional players, especially Pakistan. The article begins with discussing US invasion of Afghanistan. It then discusses the defeat of the Taliban government but continuation of war with the Taliban, without yielding desired results to the US. The article also evaluates the Afghan Peace Talks which ultimately led towards signing of historic US-Taliban Peace Deal earlier this year. The study explores three possible scenarios emerging from the intra-Afghan dialogue. It also highlights important lessons that could be drawn from the wars in Afghanistan, discusses Pakistan's role and offers a roadmap for its future engagement with Kabul.

## US Entry into Afghanistan

If the comparison of both parties from the time of US attack is kept in view, there was no match between the two. The US had emerged as the sole super power of the world after the cold war. It was at the pinnacle of its power not only economically and militarily, but also in terms of political clout.<sup>2</sup> Whatever may be the background and facts behind the incidents of 9/11,<sup>3</sup> the US, owing to these incidents, had the sympathies of the world as well as some moral reasoning on its side.<sup>4</sup>

Afghanistan on the other hand was among the poorest countries of the world. The Taliban-led government in the country was isolated in the world.<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, the Taliban government was recognized by only three countries in the world - Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) - even at the peak of its rule.<sup>6</sup> The infrastructure in Afghanistan had already been destroyed due to the civil wars and an earlier war against Soviets lasting over two decades.

In the context of peerless economic, political and military power of the US and its apparently weak opponent, it was quite logical to expect that the war will conclude in a short time. In ordinary circumstances, the only conceivable hurdle the US could have faced was a distance of thousands of miles. Still it had the most advanced and efficient defense technology at its disposal.<sup>7</sup> The way this technology has shrunk the distances, this distance was insignificant, especially when Washington was also backed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and other regional countries, militarily and politically.

## War Ends but Enters a New Phase

As expected, the Taliban government lost the war within two months.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the Taliban movement proved to be a formidable fighting force. Thus, the expectations of the US and its allies were not quite met and it became US' 'longest war'. There were many reasons behind this continuous extension but it would suffice to mention here that other than the strengths of both parties, there were other factors, within and outside Afghanistan, linked to dragging the war to the next two decades.<sup>9</sup>

Irrespective of the claims made by both parties, it became evident that considering ground realities, the war could be extended but none of the parties could be forced down to its knees. Still the





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process of dialogue could not start as there was no shortage of resources for the US and its allies to continue the war while the Taliban on the other hand had nothing to lose in a war which they perceived as a 'religious' and 'holy war'.

The continued human and financial costs<sup>10</sup> over a practically useless war, were slowly becoming a scar<sup>11</sup> on the capabilities as well as the image of the US despite its abundant resources. On the other hand, Taliban, in spite of suffering heavy casualties, were successful in maintaining their organization and strength. They also succeeded in taking hold of a major part of Afghanistan, especially that of its rural areas, and with some ups and downs, they are still able to retain that hold to-date.<sup>12</sup>

It will not be wrong to estimate in this situation that the war could have been continued without a result for many more years. It, however, has its own fatigue and hence when the results are not on offer, it is not easy for any party to drag the war only for the sake of fighting.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Beginning of the Dialogue Process**

This was the background in which the dialogue process was initiated between the US and the Taliban in 2010. Apparently, it was only for the exchange of a few prisoners,<sup>14</sup> but otherwise it was also a sign that the US is now interested in finding a way to exit from Afghanistan. This was the occasion when the US' officials held a meeting with Tayyab Agha, the Taliban leader and a representative of Mullah Umar, in Munich. Held secretly at the time, these contacts were facilitated by Germany and Qatar.<sup>15</sup> The next two rounds of talks were held in 2011 and then finally at the start of 2012, the Taliban were allowed to open their political office in Qatar.<sup>16</sup>

Hence the talks for 29 February 2020 US-Taliban deal – related to US exit as well as the announcement of intra-Afghan dialogue – apparently

*The present peace efforts are endorsed by all regional countries and international institutions, the open demonstration of which was seen first at the US-Taliban deal ceremony*

started 18 months ago in 2019<sup>17</sup>, in reality they are linked to the connections which started taking place nearly ten years ago.

### **Push and Pull in the Emerging Scenario Some Positives**

This backdrop points to the reality that this ten-year period of continued war and dialogue was a sufficient time for the two parties to know each other, understand about each other's weaknesses, strengths, and their positions on different issues. This is why it was expected that things would proceed swiftly following the deal of 29 February 2020.

Another positive aspect is that the US-Taliban deal and the exodus of US forces has given way to a conducive environment, to some extent. Meanwhile some of the imminent complications have been sorted out in this period, while a political will is also present at both sides.

Moreover, the US is no more a direct party in the dialogue process as it has announced the date of complete exit of its forces (by spring 2021),<sup>18</sup> which was the primary demand of the Taliban,<sup>19</sup> before initiating any dialogue. As a result of this exit, Washington will now be able to play a role of a facilitator, whereas the Afghan government, which was divided and in chaos, is now active as a unit for talks, reportedly after the initiative of former President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai to hold Jirga.<sup>20</sup> Except a few,<sup>21</sup> most of the key players are now on board.

Another achievement is that this time the present peace efforts are endorsed by all regional countries<sup>22</sup> and international institutions, the open demonstration of which was seen first at the US-Taliban deal ceremony on 29 February 2020,<sup>23</sup> and later on 12 September when the intra-Afghan dialogue commenced in Doha.<sup>24</sup> Even the efforts to facilitate intra-Afghan dialogue were being made by Pakistan and other regional players, namely Iran, Russia and China.<sup>25</sup> Hence, apparently any interest from any regional or international player to disrupt these proceedings seems unlikely, at least at this point in time.

### **The Challenges to Sustainability of the Process**

The above is however only one side of the post-US exit deal scenario. To understand and exploit the



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possibilities of the future, it is imperative to evaluate the other side i.e. challenges in sustaining the dialogue and peace process. These challenges are both from within and outside Afghanistan.

### Challenges from Within

At the outset one needs to understand that the situation is very complex; as pointed out earlier, even the present deal has practically taken a period of ten years to conclude. Although the deal is substantial in nature, it can only be regarded as an initial progress. It indicates that the complicated matters, which are now on the table, may take longer time than anticipated in sorting out even after the US exit.

- The apprehension also finds strength with the fact that the intra-Afghan dialogue for agenda setting and finalizing the means and processes between the Afghan government and Taliban were supposed to start within ten days after the deal. Instead it took over six months and finally started on 12 September 2020, whereas an increase of violent incidents was also observed during this period.<sup>26</sup> The slow pace of dialogue process following the 12 September has also strengthened the fear that the impending critical issues like ceasefire, future political system, power sharing, and constitutional amendments, etc. may take even longer to discuss and finalize.
- While both Taliban and the US have conceded their original positions<sup>27</sup> to reach the deal, Taliban appear to have emerged stronger in the process.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the weaknesses of the Afghan government have been further exposed. The equation in the emerging scenario is that US, despite all of its military, political and economic might, could not bring the Taliban to their knees

*Circumstances are leading towards the formation of a new temporary government. But as it is said 'the devil is in the details'*

and had to step back considerably for reaching the deal. Hence, the chances of Kabul government convincing the Taliban to get much in return are not very high. The fear of losing in the dialogue will push Afghan government to employ delay tactics.

- It now seems certain that circumstances are leading towards the formation of a new temporary government.<sup>29</sup> But as it is said 'the devil is in the details', the real question is that whether this temporary government will be formed as per the present constitution of the Afghan government, or will some amendments be introduced in the Afghanistan constitution to suit the Taliban's liking, or will it be based entirely on the latter's suggestions of an Emirati system?<sup>30</sup> Who will be the top leader in this new setting and what will be the distribution of different ministries?
- Ceasefire has not been agreed up till now. So long the ceasefire is not in place, the risk of losing the prevailing, somewhat conducive environment in case of any major untoward incident is quite high. A significant question within this context is that of the position of incumbent President Ashraf Ghani. Any new government setup would automatically terminate his presidency. And in reality, this question is not only valid for Ghani, but for all of his key associates. So there are apprehensions that all such people may like the talks to be stalled for as long as possible, if not failed.
- Another contentious question associated with the future dispensation and constitution is Taliban's position on Shariah. The Taliban primarily are the followers of Hanafi School of thought, hence they are determined to run the affairs of the country as per the same school of thought.<sup>31</sup> The situation in turn could trigger the subject of sectarian tensions as this would be in contradiction of the

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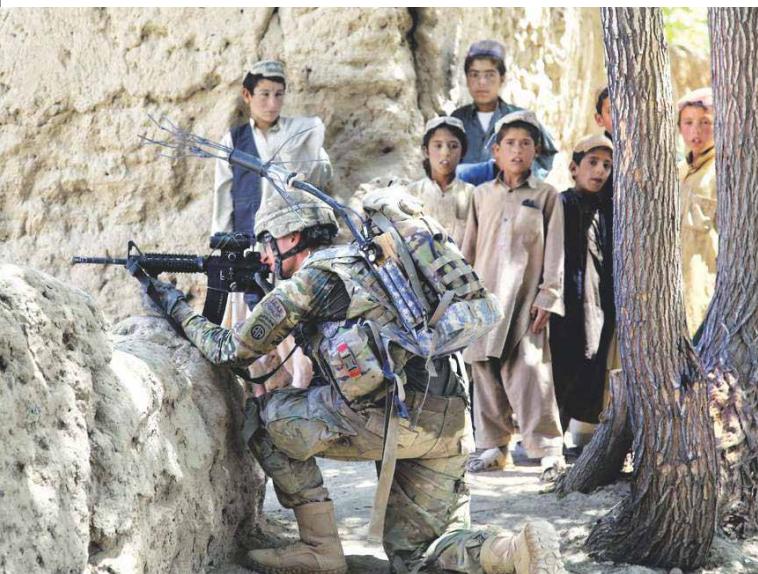
current constitution of Afghanistan, which though is based on Islamic principles, but does not insist on any specific school of thought.<sup>32</sup> Sectarianism though is not a new phenomenon, it has been an instrumental factor in the civil war in the past and also has an external dimension associated with it. Sensing the situation, the Taliban have made moves to reach out to the Shia community during last few months,<sup>33</sup> however, the present negotiating team of the Taliban does not have any Shiite representation.

- The ongoing wars for the last over four decades in Afghanistan have also created a group of warlords within its socio economic and political settings.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand there are many other groups which have developed high stakes with the 'War Economy';<sup>35</sup> and then there are drug and other mafias.<sup>36</sup> The ending of war and political instability in Afghanistan is likely to dampen their political, social and economic interests and hence they will try to disrupt these peace efforts with whatever links and resources they have.
- The decades of war have without a doubt provided Taliban with strong organizational setup reflecting complete unity in their objectives. Irrespective of their internal differences, which existed even during the leadership of Mullah

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Umar<sup>37</sup> they had only one expressed target i.e. killing the enemy and continue war and as they were underground, which meant little contact with the media and outside world. This kept their differences, if any, not so significant. As the talks and interactions proceed within the political arena, it may become a challenge to retain harmony in the political policies and preferences with the ones following and stressing the military approach.<sup>38</sup> The possibility of some pro-militancy Taliban leaving their ranks, in case of ceasefire can thus not be ruled out. In such a situation the presence of Daesh or other smaller groups will provide them platforms to continue as warriors. Hence Daesh, which is continuing its violence may find itself strengthened<sup>39</sup> in destabilizing the ground and disturbing the peace process.

- The ethnic divide in Afghanistan will also play an important role. Any ethnic group fearing to be left out in the future setups may try to sabotage the peace process and look out for the ways for continuing violent activities. There is no doubt that every ethnic group has at least some capability to disturb the environment in certain areas and they can also find help from external hands. Meanwhile, there will be another challenge to harmonize the Taliban and Afghan National Army on one platform, who have been engaged in fighting for nearly two decades.



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### The External Dimension

The above is not an exhaustive list of the challenges emanating from within the Afghanistan, nevertheless, it indicates and summarizes the overall environment where one or a combination of few of these and similar factors could create frequent hurdles. The smooth progress of the process is also dependent on the support from the external front.



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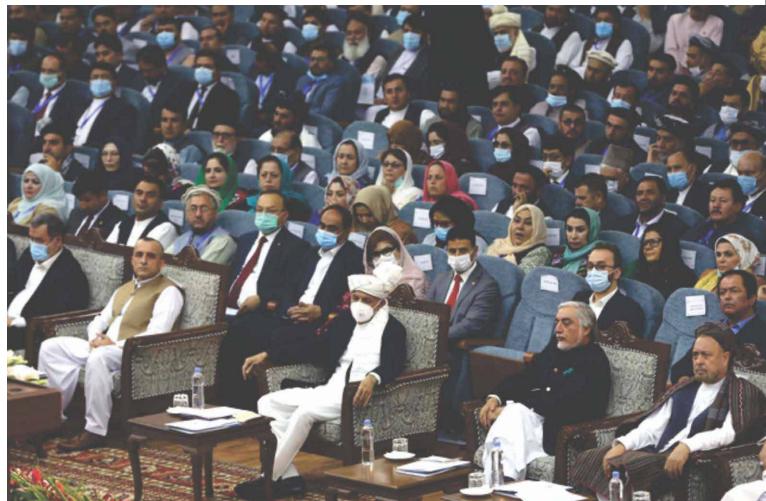
- At the external front a factor of uncertainty is directly related to the US system and its current approach. It is clear that there is not much unity of thought among different institutions in the US over the exit of its forces<sup>40</sup> and thus leaving Afghanistan. The reasons behind the success of the present deal was the personal interest of President Trump, who continued to stress for the return of its forces despite these differences.<sup>41</sup> After the elections of November 2020, the urgency and the need for continuing and implementing this process may diminish. Now the question is that would Washington still be in favor of continuing with this policy, with the same zeal and spirit with Joe Biden's presidency? Such things have happened in the past when even Obama, in contrast to his openly declared claims of drawdown,<sup>42</sup> had to reinforce the deployment in Afghanistan.<sup>43</sup>
- There is no doubt that all the regional countries are in favor of peace talks at present but would they not be wanting to use the Afghan land to further their interests in the future? India, for instance, has been very active in Afghanistan and it has also invested in it significantly. This investment has not only been in the development projects<sup>44</sup> but also within the government and its intelligence infrastructure.<sup>45</sup> A major consideration for India behind doing all this was to increase pressure on Pakistan, and it also was successful in disrupting Pak-Afghan relations and keeping Pakistan engaged on its disturbed Western borders.<sup>46</sup>
- If the Taliban become a part of the government as expected, New Delhi will be apprehensive that the former will be friendlier towards Pakistan as compared to India.<sup>47</sup> New Delhi, in this situation, will try its best to exploit the existential internal rifts and divisions within the Afghan society and establishment.
- In the last two decades the systems developed in Afghanistan under the patronage of the US, has seen the emergence of a new and active civil society in the country.<sup>48</sup> There is also a powerful media<sup>49</sup> and a dynamic social media community. Whatever shape a civil society may have, it has a global footprint and is also backed by many

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Western governments. Most of these people are not very comfortable with the ideology of the Taliban and their political and social views and past practices.<sup>50</sup> They express their apprehensions and are quite vocal in opposing the Taliban. They will also be inclined to use their local and international influence and do whatever they can, to create obstructions in the whole process of Afghan dialogue.

### Three Possible Scenarios

Considering the above push and pull factors of the complex evolving scenario in Afghanistan, it can be said that it will be a complicated and long process which may frequently face ups and downs. There will be a need for patience and maintaining a positive environment to ensure its sustainability. The Afghans are well aware of this reality as they have a strong tradition of Jirga through which they are able to identify many solutions.<sup>51</sup> Sustaining patience to further the process without letting irritation and annoyance take over will be a test for the facilitators who, pressed in a competitive, and Value for Money (VFM) environment, primarily would wish to see the results as soon as possible.



Afghan Loya Jirga meeting in Kabul, Afghanistan, 7 August 2020



*The third scenario is that of a gradual progress, albeit with some ups and downs. This, among all, is the most likely scenario in view of the push and pull factors*

The Taliban now are a recognized on-ground political reality who have been given commitment to be freed from all the US and United Nations (UN) sanctions.<sup>52</sup> Not only have they had dialogue with the US on a level at par, but also they were able to get 5,000 of their prisoners released under the peace deal without any ceasefire following the deal. These are big achievements at their end which they would not want to waste, especially when they also know that 'war fatigue' is increasing<sup>53</sup> and they also realize that the common people now want an end to this plight of 'war' one way or the other.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, the reliance of the Afghan government over US is an aspect that will push them to have meaningful and result-oriented discussions.<sup>55</sup>

Following the US-Taliban deal and the return of the US forces, intra-Afghan dialogue could lead to three possible scenarios. One, the dialogue will be quick and result-oriented and all the important forces within Afghanistan will collectively set on a new course for the future. As much as this scenario seems heartening and ideal, its transformation into a reality does not seem to be that easy.

The other possibility is that the intra-Afghan dialogue could fail. In spite of the challenges discussed above, it is now easy for everyone to comprehend that this is going to be the worst scenario. Any failure in these talks will pave way for a long, terrifying civil war which will have consequences not only for Afghanistan but the whole region will be rattled with its tremors. In any such situation, the present Kabul regime may not even be able to survive as it is not supposed to be aided by the US air forces anymore.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the regime in Kabul and, as a consequence, roles in Kabul might change but the destruction will go on.

The third scenario is that of a gradual progress, albeit with some ups and downs. This, among all, is the most likely scenario in view of the push and pull factors

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discussed above. It will be long but would possibly be the most sustainable and productive future for Afghanistan and the region.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

While the above discussion was focused on the US-led war in Afghanistan the lessons that could be drawn from it are not very different from what the earlier Afghan wars in the recent past have shown. These wars spanning over four decades have brought to light many realities. The peace deal as well as the intra-Afghan dialogue, both can be regarded as stages at best and not the final conclusion. For a sustainable peace and stability, it will be imperative to admit that all parties have made mistakes. There is a need to reflect over those mistakes, draw lessons and move forward keeping eyes firmly on the future, while learning from past mistakes.

Whatever may be the title of the Afghan war, the vested political and economic interests, especially the control over its geostrategic position and its mineral resources remained the main reason in the backdrop. But these objectives were not met by anyone due to the unending war. The desire in many countries to occupy these resources, however, has still not diminished. On the other hand, Afghanistan neither has skills nor the means to exploit these natural resources. This can offer a vast scope for cooperation, and all parties having interest in this will need to walk the path of cohesion and cooperation.

The weaknesses of global governance have once again been exposed during the Afghanistan wars. Though the UN was apparently present on every occasion at every stage of war, there are many genuine questions seeking answers about its actual required role and control over the ground. Their might be no quick fix to address these questions, nevertheless, these cannot and should not be ignored.

A pertinent set of, academic and legal, as well as social and political questions which are directly related to the Afghan war is regarding terrorism, its definition and the treatment it requires to be contained. The US, while attacking Afghanistan titled its war as 'War on Terrorism'. Ironically, to end the war, Washington is engaged in negotiations with the same people it regarded as 'terrorist' earlier to justify its 18-year war on 'terrorism'. Actions of terrorism cannot be justified yet the handling requires a much prudent approach than simply using brute force. Lastly, it is imperative to understand the anthropological and political realities for lasting stability and peace in Afghanistan. The multi-ethnic, multi-tribal confederations transformed into the state of



*it is imperative to understand the anthropological and political realities for lasting stability and peace in Afghanistan*

Afghanistan and its governing machineries need to be kept in view. An exhaustive account, anthropologizing the modern day Afghan society can help formulate an effective and meaningful strategy for dealing with the imbroglio created during the last four decades.

The regional and global stakeholders in all sincerity should realize that historically, the Mullahs (clergy), Malaks (tribal lords) and Padshahs (the Kings) were the key elements of Afghan state and society. The unending disruptions and divisions cannot be countered and stemmed without harmonizing these elements according to the socio-political culture of Afghanistan for a permanent and durable solution for peace and stability.

#### **Role of Pakistan**

Islamabad has always been a staunch supporter of peace and stability in Afghanistan. As a matter of fact, Pakistan has consistently stressed for 'Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process' and the same has finally commenced now. The former has played a key role in bringing the Afghan peace process to its current stage, which is a great achievement given the hardline approach of the Taliban.<sup>57</sup> It is time for Pakistan to strengthen its linkages and engagement further not only with the Taliban, but also with the other entities affirmatively, ultimately seeking winning over the hearts and minds of all concerned in Afghanistan. Incidents causing strains in mutual relations may occur, but these should only be seen as accidents and treated like that; these should not become a subject of any blame game.

A large number of Afghans, regardless of background, have spent considerable time in Pakistan as refugees. Many of them—including even people like Dr Abdullah Abdullah and Hamid Karzai—are now performing in senior positions. Connections of all these

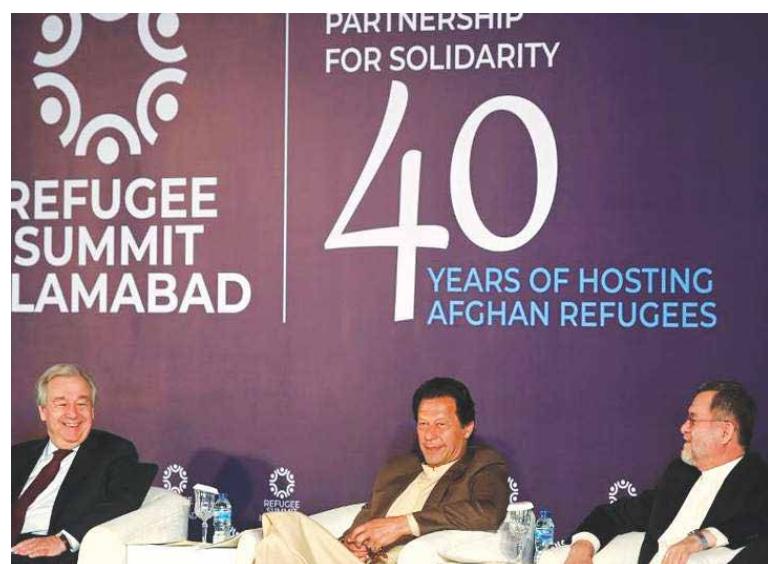
*Pakistan has been a direct victim of the wars in Afghanistan: along with suffering huge human and financial losses, it has hosted five million Afghan refugees*

*Peace and stability in Afghanistan will not only warrant peace in Pakistan, but will also facilitate return of Afghan refugees, an improved border management and increased bilateral trade between the two countries*

people with Pakistan should be used effectively to further mutual trust and relations between both countries to promote sustainable peace.

Pakistan has been a direct victim<sup>58</sup> of the wars in Afghanistan, along with suffering huge human and financial losses, it has hosted five million Afghan refugees. There are fears of having a whole new lot of Afghan refugees migrating to Pakistan in case of failed peace talks. Therefore, the success of the peace process is the most favorable option for Pakistan; for the realization of which it should take all possible measures as it cannot afford a failure in talks.

Peace and stability in Afghanistan will not only warrant peace in Pakistan, but will also facilitate return of Afghan refugees, an improved border management and increased bilateral trade between the two countries by paving a way for various other ventures from Afghanistan to the Central Asian Republics (CARs).<sup>59</sup> The success of the peace process will also be crucial for the success of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is not only vital for this region, but owing to its connection with the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), is also a part of the global game-changer plan.<sup>60</sup>





*Keeping in view the deep rooted historical, geographical, linguistic, cultural and civilizational ties, Pakistan and Afghanistan can rightly be seen as two countries - one nation*

In the longer terms, Pakistan should aim for establishing a new cooperation model with Afghanistan. Together Pakistan and Afghanistan are a population of 250 million. If the recent, somewhat bitter history of Pak-Afghan relations is ignored and the deep rooted historical, geographical, linguistic, cultural and civilizational ties are kept in view, both these countries can rightly be seen as two countries - one nation. Building on these grounds, they could move for a mutually cohesive planning over basic necessities of life; first in food security and health arenas, which then could be followed with cooperation on water and environmental issues and improving and expanding educational infrastructure. Later a gradual progress can be made in other areas like infrastructure development, tourism and sports, industries and minerals etc. Instead of making big announcements over these ventures, this progress should be targeted with a bit by bit practical approach.

The way Pakistan has hosted Afghan refugees for 40 years, can actually serve as an example or a pilot for any such ideation or planning. If matters are proceeded within this spirit, then complicated issues like border management will be automatically sorted out.

Wars bring destructions, and the human losses incurred during a war can never be compensated, but if the end of the war is managed prudently, the fruits of peace can far outweigh the destruction the war has caused.

*Khalid Rahman is Executive President & Director General, Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Islamabad*

### NOTES

1. There are 4 key points of the agreement, reducing violence, withdrawal of foreign troops, intra Afghan negotiations and Afghanistan would not become a refuge for terrorists.
2. <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/ipe/2000-09GDP.htm>.
3. <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/assets/pdf/anti-semitism/united-states/911-conspiracy-theories-2011-8-30.pdf>
4. <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/europe/09/11/trade-centre.reaction/index.html>
5. <https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/afghanistan?year=2001#:~:text=The%20GDP%20figure%20in%202001,195%20countries%20that%20we%20publish>
6. <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/178/32984.html>
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