Afghanistan and the Negotiation Process

The peace talks process in Afghanistan has not made any real progress since its initiation in June 2015. Subsequent efforts to push forward its development were interrupted twice within less than a year.

In June 2015 Pakistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the start of inter-Afghan dialogue in Islamabad. China, Pakistan and the United States stepped up as intermediaries, which led to a dramatic increase in interest from the world community in the problem. But by July 30, 2015, on the eve of the second round, it became clear that the Taliban had declared its willingness to take part in talks on behalf of the Afghan Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, who died on April 30, 2013. The deception was revealed, the dialogue was halted, Pakistani-Afghan relations rapidly deteriorated, and the observers quarrelled. Later, in the autumn of 2015, Islamabad put a lot of effort to revive two sets of negotiations simultaneously: the first between the GNU (Government of National Unity) and the Afghan Taliban, the second - among the three international intermediaries + the Afghani GNU within the framework of the Quadripartite Coordination Group (QCG).

It is important to emphasise that the first set has not yet commenced. The second was initiated in the autumn of 2015. In December 2015, the “Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process” Conference took place in Islamabad at the ministerial level. Its participants reaffirmed their commitment to effective cooperation in the fight against threats to security and the promotion of regional cooperation. It was only after the settlement of the fundamental differences within the QCG on their views of peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan that Islamabad hosted the third and fourth meetings in January and February 2016. In May 2016, the fifth meeting of the group took place but it bore no results. The Head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan S. Aziz explained the failure of the QCG by the “reluctance to negotiate” of the Afghan Taliban who, in his opinion, did not respond to the joint efforts of the intermediaries.

The QCG is making attempts to develop a common formula for talks with Afghan militants. However, its approaches and techniques for achieving the common goal are different: each capital is pursuing its own national interests.

Pakistan supports “a homegrown Afghan and Afghan-led peace process.” Given the experience of the previous decades of Pakistani-Afghan relations, Islamabad is primarily interested in strengthening the vertical power structure in the hands of the Pashtuns, the numerous ethnic group settled in the provinces in the south and on the border with Pakistan.

China, adopting a neutral position on the issue of intra-Afghan leadership, prioritises the time factor. In March 2015, Beijing launched the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project: The route of the infrastructure starts in the Chinese Kashgar, near the joint borders of Afghanistan, China and Pakistan, and then goes to the Gwadar port on the coast of the Strait of Hormuz. The Taliban’s armed attack in the spring of 2016 on Kabul ruined China’s plans to build transport and energy routes for the transportation of goods to the south. Therefore Beijing is interested in the soonest-possible settlement of the situation in Afghanistan.
The United States have been insisting on the peaceful settlement in Afghanistan on its terms since the London Conference in January 2009. It sets out three basic requirements for the Taliban in Afghanistan: the cessation of hostilities, breaking ties with militant groups that refuse to lay down their arms, and the recognition of the Afghan constitution.

Since the end of September 2001, the Afghan Taliban has insisted on the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan. Washington’s refusal to comply with the basic requirement of the Afghan Taliban is clear: the current US President Barack Obama announced plans to leave up to 8,000 military personnel of the US forces in Afghanistan until the end of 2017.

Thus, there is imbalance in the positions within the QCG, and the Taliban maintains an uncompromising position, which, all in all, sets an obstacle in the settlement process in Afghanistan.

For the last two years, Kabul, understanding the hopelessness of direct negotiations with the Taliban, has been promoting a draft Agreement with the militant group Hezb-e-Islami led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, one of the most experienced warlords. He is a veteran of several Afghan wars and began fighting in the 80s against Soviet forces. Hezb-e-Islami militants were accused of murders and numerous human rights violations during the civil war in 1992-1996 when Hekmatyar held one of the highest posts in the Islamic State of Afghanistan. But Kabul authorities embarked on a deal with Hekmatyar. The agreement sets out a number of requirements, the most important of which being the granting of amnesty to warlords, despite the previous accusations of war crimes; and the release of all prisoners (two thousand militants) currently held by the Afghan authorities within three months. It is expected that the group will be recognized as a bona fide political party and the government will grant it the right to participate in elections at all levels. The Afghan government has committed to apply to the UN to remove Hekmatyar from the black list of international terrorists. But most importantly, President Ashraf Ghani is willing to transfer control of a number of districts over to the ex-militants in exchange for peace.

The local press reports that in recent years Hezb-e-Islami has played a minor role in the overall militant activity in Afghanistan and has not effectively influenced events. Many in Afghanistan have questioned the draft agreement. However, there is a need for a dramatic move: an effective example by a prominent charismatic figure.

But even these efforts have been undermined. In May, an airstrike from a US drone was conducted on Pakistan with the aim of taking out Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour. It is no secret that Pentagon way too often chooses to eliminate the militants and the irreconcilable enemies of foreign troops in Afghanistan who refuse to accept US peace terms. However, young ranks of militants who have grown up amid war conditions rise up to replace those who have died. A day after the death of Mullah A. Mansour a loya jirga in Quetta elected the new leader of the Afghan Taliban.

US air strikes on Pakistan brought about another deterioration in Pakistan-US relations. Under these circumstances, in May 2016, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan issued a warning about the two most serious dangers that the region faced.

First, the growing number of varying militant groups in Afghanistan. The strengthening of the rebel movement is testament to their dominance, which undermines Afghanistan’s security regime.

Second, Islamabad does not preclude the possibility of another foreign military intervention in Afghanistan’s affairs in any format and at any time.

Recent developments in the AfPak region confirm that the United States reject the method of conflict settlement negotiations proposed by Afghanistan’s neighbouring countries. Two opposing trends are forming in the region:

- a strengthening of the US position and, accordingly, the need to deploy US troops for much longer than until the end of 2017. This will lead to increased pressure on Islamabad from Washington;

- a strengthening of anti-American sentiment within the Pakistan military establishment. According to Pakistani-American agreements of 2010, Balochistan is a no-fly zone for unmanned aerial vehicles. The province is home to the fledging construction of infrastructure projects included in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project, and General R. Sharif, the Chief of Army Staff, has pledged to protect the project, which is of critical importance to Pakistan, at all costs.

Thus, the aims and objectives of the regional players in the peace settlement in Afghanistan, Islamabad, Kabul and Beijing, have come into conflict with Washington’s position.
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