

With the US-Taliban deal in place, what are the next policy interventions needed to continue the momentum towards a secure, peaceful, and prosperous Afghanistan? This policy memo shares a series of recommendations to ensure continued impetus from within and without.

Assessing New Opportunities

Examining the potential role of new approaches, external partners, and infrastructure investment in post-deal Afghanistan.

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Introduction

The US-Taliban deal is due to be signed on February 29, 2020ⁱ, which seemed all but impossible with US President Donald Trump pulling out in September 2019ⁱⁱ. The deal is preceded by a seven-day period of reduction in violenceⁱⁱⁱ, signalling willingness from the Taliban side to end hostilities and thereby achieve a ceasefire. There are fears of whether the deal is sustainable, and concerns over the long-term consequences, lending to an air of cautious optimism and wary cynicism, especially considering that the next step - an intra-Afghan deal - will be the tougher nut to crack^{iv}.

The question then becomes, what can be done immediately following the deal by relevant stakeholders to ensure future stability, and impetus towards peace in Afghanistan? Relevant stakeholders include 1) the intra-Afghan stakeholders (Afghan Government/political power brokers in opposition to the government/Taliban), 2) immediate external stakeholders, such as Pakistan, China and Iran, and 3) other powers with regional influence, such as the US, Russia, Turkey, and India. Within this broader framework, three sub-questions are postulated:

1. What are some of the new approaches to sustained peace?
2. What is the role of external partners in ensuring an intra-Afghan peace process?
3. What is the role of infrastructure and connectivity in Afghan stabilization?

The overall recommendations will loosely follow these three categories, and provide practical interventions that can be applied in the struggle for stability, peace, and cohesion in Afghanistan. In order to arrive at these recommendations the Royal Danish Defence College (RDDC), and the Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), conducted a two-day multilateral policy dialogue with subject matter experts from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Denmark, the US, and the UK^v. The participants included former government/military officials and technocrats, civil society organization members, academics and scholars from both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The dialogue also saw participation from the Afghan, Pakistani, and Chinese governments, as well as subject matter experts from the US, and the UK. The discussions of the seminar are distilled in this document as policy recommendations.

It should be noted, that obvious recommendations, such as the ever-present need for peace, the need to set aside differences to pursue the common goals of security and prosperity, will not be covered. These are considered the baseline; a common vision already shared, and are always recommended in any policy endeavour on Afghanistan.

Overall recommendations:

- Intra-Afghan dialogue is key to secure durable peace. Such talks should be representative, on equal footing, and prioritize reduction of violence, and not personal political agendas.
- All relevant external actors need to endorse the Afghan peace deal in order for this to succeed.
- Neither the UN nor the US should take the lead role in any negotiations, but remain supportive in implementation and technical facilitation.
- There is a minimum level of security and stability required for any investment in any infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. However, connectivity in of itself can be a driver in stability, and opportunities of economic cooperation should be explored in parallel to the peace process.

New approaches to sustained peace

There is no question that an intra-Afghan dialogue is required to secure durable peace and sustained security for the Afghan people. The dialogue should be representative, on equal footing, and prioritize peace for all. Such dialogue could be supported and even formalized by using the current US-Taliban deal as a first step.

In order to arrive at a robust solution to the intra-Afghan issues, both internal and external stakeholders should always prioritize ending the violence and not any one's political program. This must be accompanied by demonstrable confidence building measures (CBMs) in order to bridge the existing trust deficit.

Regarding the US-Taliban deal, the US withdrawal should be gradual and complete with a structured timeline, while ensuring that the Afghan security forces are capacitated to fill the security gap, in order to avoid a situation similar to the civil war in 1992-96; a situation caused by an immediate stop of Soviet financial resources to the Afghan security sector. Conversely, the clause regarding commitment by the Taliban to reduce violence and not provide safe harbour for Al-Qaida, Daesh, or other terror groups should also be ensured. This deal should be followed by CBMs such as transparent and detailed prisoner exchanges to ensure continued goodwill. Another CBM may include leveraging the *Loya Jirga* as the instrument for political integration, and the inclusion of the Taliban.

In general, the US-Taliban deal should include interdependent elements, meaning that both sides benefit from mutual development. The gradual US withdrawal should be matched by Taliban reduction of violence. This ensures a process that is slow and incremental, but sustainable.

This agreement should bear in mind the need for preserving the dignity of the Taliban as this is key component of the tribal societies. It is also important to recognize that the US will remain a crucial stakeholder after a deal is signed especially in bringing both sides to the table in the intra-Afghan talks as it will have a working relationship with both.

Key recommendations:

- Intra-Afghan dialogue is key to secure durable peace. Such talks should be representative, on equal footing, and prioritize reduction of violence, and not personal political agendas.
- Ensure that US withdrawal is gradual, and complete with a structured timeline ensuring that Afghan security forces are correspondingly capacitated.
- Ensure an interdependent agreement in which a gradual US withdrawal is matched by Taliban reduction of violence.
- Acknowledge that the US is a crucial stakeholder *after* a deal is signed, especially in bringing all sides to the table.

The role of external actors

For the intra-Afghan peace process to succeed, it needs to be endorsed by external entities, most importantly 1) the immediate neighbours; Iran, Pakistan and China, 2) then the wider region; Russia, Turkey and India, and then 3) the broad international community. External actors should also act as guarantors, to avoid a situation like in the 1990s, as mentioned above. It is imperative for the success of the peace process that all proxy activities are limited, but this will

automatically be the case if a genuine endorsement of the results of a potential intra Afghan deal is given.

The US is in a position to facilitate the intra-Afghan dialogue by virtue of having a working relationship with the two main sides, and being the largest engaged external actor. However, the US should not necessarily lead the process because it is still a party in the conflict. It must be taken into account that this is an election year in the US, which implies that all high-level strategic decision-making will take into account the re-election campaign for Trump. Finally, as mentioned in response to the first posited question above, the US should seek to leave Afghanistan without causing a collapse of the present political system, as such a power vacuum could potentially lead to a civil war. The subsequent steps, while potentially facilitated by the US, must include regional powers and coordinated communication on progress/set-backs.

Despite being the largest regional power, China has up until now played a limited role in the Afghan peace process. The current US-China rivalry could risk an even more limited Chinese engagement in Afghanistan. This reflects a general point, that a US-led process is not desirable as the process should not result in Afghanistan losing support from other external actors, such as China, which are fundamental for sustainability.

China's investment in the region, discussed further in response to the third question below, could be assessed if the US reduces its financial support. There was, however, a consensus that as of now, no other country can step into the US shoes, as far as the military and financial muscle are concerned.

Regarding Pakistan, it was discussed and emphasized that it is a vital stakeholder in the Afghan peace process. Pakistan should be viewed as a bridging force rather than a destabilizing one. Pakistan needs to continue its support for the Afghan peace deal by utilizing the influence it has over elements within the Afghan Taliban. This will further the transformation of part of the Taliban into a political force from its present state as a military organisation. In addition, Pakistan should prioritize peace in Afghanistan over its strategic preference of having a friendly government in the country if a neutral one is a prerequisite for progress. Implementation of the Afghan peace deal on Pakistani territory, i.e., limiting the ability to mobilise for potential non pro-peace elements of the Taliban will have to be addressed internally in Pakistan, parallel to intra-Afghan talks. Given the influence of countries like Iran and Russia, Pakistan should not be viewed as the only country with leverage over the Taliban, who have receptive ears in Tehran, Beijing and Moscow.

Even though Iran is often perceived as a potential destabilizing factor, it should be taken on board for any enduring peace mechanism. Like Pakistan, Iran is an immediate stakeholder with significant regional influence and if its key security interests are perceived to be threatened, Iran will take counterproductive countermeasures.

Regarding the UN, the body's role should be supportive in implementation, technical facilitation, and preventing external actors from interference, or in the case of the US, looking to further US interests alone. The UN, however, should not take the lead role in any negotiations, but should be given a key role in the implementation phase.

Regarding conflicting external stakeholders, it was recommended that conflicting geo-political interests of different stakeholders must be redressed to achieve sustainable peace. Policy-making must take into account that there are certain interest groups that want to perpetuate a

“controlled chaos” in order to protect their own interests in an economy defined by war and conflict of over four decades. This comprehensive stock of conflicting interests and dividends for different actors has to be addressed by identifying sub-groups and individuals within this category. It is important to realize that in order to better facilitate the process and reduce complexity, the entire endeavour must be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

Key recommendations:

- External actors need to endorse the Afghan peace process in order for this to succeed.
- Acknowledge that external actors vary in degree of importance.
- The US should not lead the intra-Afghan talks (but facilitate), as it is party in the conflict, and could result in Afghanistan losing support from other external actors, such as China.
- Pakistan is a vital stakeholder in the Afghan peace process, and needs to utilize the influence it has over elements within the Afghan Taliban in order to support the transformation of the Taliban into a political force.
- The UN should not take the lead role in any negotiations, but remain supportive in implementation, technical facilitation, and preventing external actors from interference, or in the case of the US, looking to further US-interests alone.

Infrastructure and connectivity

“Connectivity” should be the guiding principle for future cooperation and relations between the regional countries. Regional economic interdependency and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), need to be the focus to concert synergies on economic growth and stabilization. The prospect of including Afghanistan in the BRI as an energy corridor should be explored extensively as this will benefit large segments of the Afghan society. Connectivity can in itself be a driver in stability. Therefore, opportunities of economic cooperation should not solely depend on a stable Afghanistan, but on how such projects can simultaneously deter proxy wars conducted to politicize and muddle.

Low-hanging fruits, quick turnaround economic schemes, and smaller projects costing less than \$500 million should be prioritized to gain quick results and build the confidence of the people. This also implies that goals for regional economic cooperation should be realistic, and not a wish list for the perfect economic environment. It is critical that the main revenue sectors in Afghanistan are revived (particularly mining), and that multilateral cooperation is sought to depoliticize the bilateral trade.

In order to materialize the dream of turning Afghanistan into a gateway of regional development, it needs to have a long-term national investment plan and decent infrastructure for facilitation. With the revival of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Afghanistan should be included in preferential or free trade agreements. Furthermore, the content of a potential peace framework should include pre-commitments of investments from external actors - especially from China - where sovereign wealth funds have great potential.

Pakistan should facilitate bilateral trade by keeping its international gateways to Afghanistan i.e. Torkham and Chaman open at all times. Harmonization of customs regulations and enhanced clearance facilities for people and cargo are some of the measures that can win international support and positive leverage within Afghanistan for Pakistan. Pakistan needs markets in and

energy from Central Asia. Therefore, a peaceful Afghanistan is imperative for Pakistan's economic and energy growth and sustainability. Afghanistan and Pakistan should identify bilateral preferential trading areas to prioritize. An obvious low-hanging fruit is an assessment of the opportunities offered by the Energy Strategy 2030 for the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC)^{vi}. Both countries should also explore the avenues of cooperation in energy generation, including renewable energy sectors.

Of course, there is a minimum level of security required for any investment in any infrastructure project in Afghanistan. However, administrative steps to include Afghanistan could be an initial game-changer, providing Afghans with a clear economic incentive to find common ground and push towards stability. China and other regional countries should step in to fill the resources gap, as the US withdraws or reduces its footprint. The first phase of infrastructure development should be focused on energy generation and independence, followed by employment initiatives and corridor/economic zone development. During the transitional phase, a special protection force should be established to protect big projects on the model of CPEC Security Division in Pakistan.

For the promotion of trade and services in the region, the issue must be heavily depoliticized, and the visa regime on both sides of the border should be made more flexible. The Rashakai Economic Zone – being set up under CPEC some 50 km northeast of Peshawar – should be leveraged to its full potential, particularly on agriculture. This could happen through setting up fruit/vegetable processing units for Afghan producers. This latter point folds into the larger idea about using existing infrastructure, and building upon it, instead of starting from scratch. Other areas of cooperation between the two countries include development of railways to promote trade, regulatory bodies to streamline shipment arrangements, efforts to deter bureaucratic obstructionism, and settling water issues^{vii}.

There are key lessons to be learned from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The key actors should find the ways to work together on a minimum agenda, especially to attract third parties for investments in projects under BRI or in bilateral ventures. The CPEC formula can be applied for future connectivity visions for Afghanistan and the greater region as a starting point.

Key recommendations:

- There is a minimum level of security and stability required for any investment in any infrastructure project in Afghanistan. However, connectivity can in itself be a driver in stability, and opportunities for economic cooperation should be explored in parallel to the peace process.
- Smaller projects costing less than \$500 million should be prioritized to gain quick results and build the confidence of the people.
- The content of a potential peace framework should include pre-commitments of investments from external actors.
- A low-hanging fruit is the opportunity offered by the Energy Strategy 2030 for the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC).
- There are key lessons to be learned from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), such as establishing a special protection force, like the CPEC Security Division, during the transitional phase to protect big projects.

Limitations and Risks

As is the case with all policy memos, there are limitations and risks associated with these ideas.

First and foremost, this document is pointless in the absence of the intra-Afghan dialogue. Without internal impetus to change the existing state of affairs, external pressures can only go so far.

Second, while the involvement of a multitude of external actors may deter the interests of one actor unilaterally, no two actors are created equal. It is possible (and historically predictable) for geo-politically maligned interests to turn this endeavour into a proxy battle for dominance and “controlled chaos” to further perceived goals. One overriding fear stems from conflicting geo-political positions, particularly of the US, Iran, and Russia. Their intense rivalry could also turn Afghanistan into a battlefield for their respective intelligence agencies.

Confidence building measures (CBMs) pepper almost every recommendation section in this document. CBMs are crucial at every stage, and on every front. Whether it is the intra-Afghan dialogue, the continued US-Taliban relationship, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, or any other bilateral or multilateral foci, as trust is in short supply in the region. All of these suggestions are limited by the ambit of the sphere of trust (especially perceived trust and/or mistrust) in the situation, actor, or region in general. If CBMs are not continuously conducted with the main strategies in parallel, it will likely result in roadblocks, obstructionism, or outright breakdown.

Conclusion

Maintaining the status quo is obviously detrimental in all respects. Continued hostilities and stalemate threaten to stall much-needed economic revival and trade connectivity. The US-Taliban deal can be an important step in the right direction, but only the intra-Afghan dialogue holds the key to stabilizing the country. Integrating Afghanistan into the larger economic fabric of the region requires commitment by the majority of the Afghan stakeholders who would need to rise above their personal ambitions and embrace ideals that could serve the entire nation instead of a few individuals.

The recommendations above are useful for various stages of the peace process, from the intra-Afghan talks, to the way forward once power-sharing is established, and long-term economic strategies to continue to push for peace and stability. As stated above, these recommendations provide broad strokes, and should not be taken out of context or without additional input. As may be evident, several of the points raised clearly require additional deliberation and unpacking.

ⁱ Gramer, R. (February 21, 2020). *Pompeo Announces Taliban Peace Deal Plan*. Foreign Policy. Retrieved 22 February 2020, from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/21/afghanistan-peace-deal-taliban-trump-pompeo-violence-reduction-agreed>.

ⁱⁱ The Economist. (September 8, 2019). *Donald Trump pulls out of Afghan peace talks with the Taliban*. The Economist. Retrieved 18 February 2020, from <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/09/08/donald-trump-pulls-out-of-afghan-peace-talks-with-the-taliban>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Qazi, S. & Mohmand, M. (February 22, 2020). *'Imagine peace': Reduction in violence offers hope to Afghans*. Aljazeera.com. Retrieved 22 February 2020, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/peace-reduction-violence-offers-hope-afghans-200222080820953.html>.



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- ^v Correspondent. (February 14, 2020). *Government to back every step to bring peace to Afghanistan: Andleeb Abbas*. The News. Retrieved 16 February 2020, from <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/614346-government-to-back-every-step-to-bring-peace-to-afghanistan-andleeb-abbas>.
- ^{vi} Asian Development Bank. (November 2019). *CAREC Energy Strategy 2030*. Asian Development Bank. Retrieved February 22, 2020, from <https://www.carecprogram.org/uploads/CAREC-Energy-Strategy-2030.pdf>.
- ^{vii} A number of memoranda of understanding – MoUs – on trade, railways, and other bilateral joint ventures between the two countries already exist but political discord continues to stall their implementation.